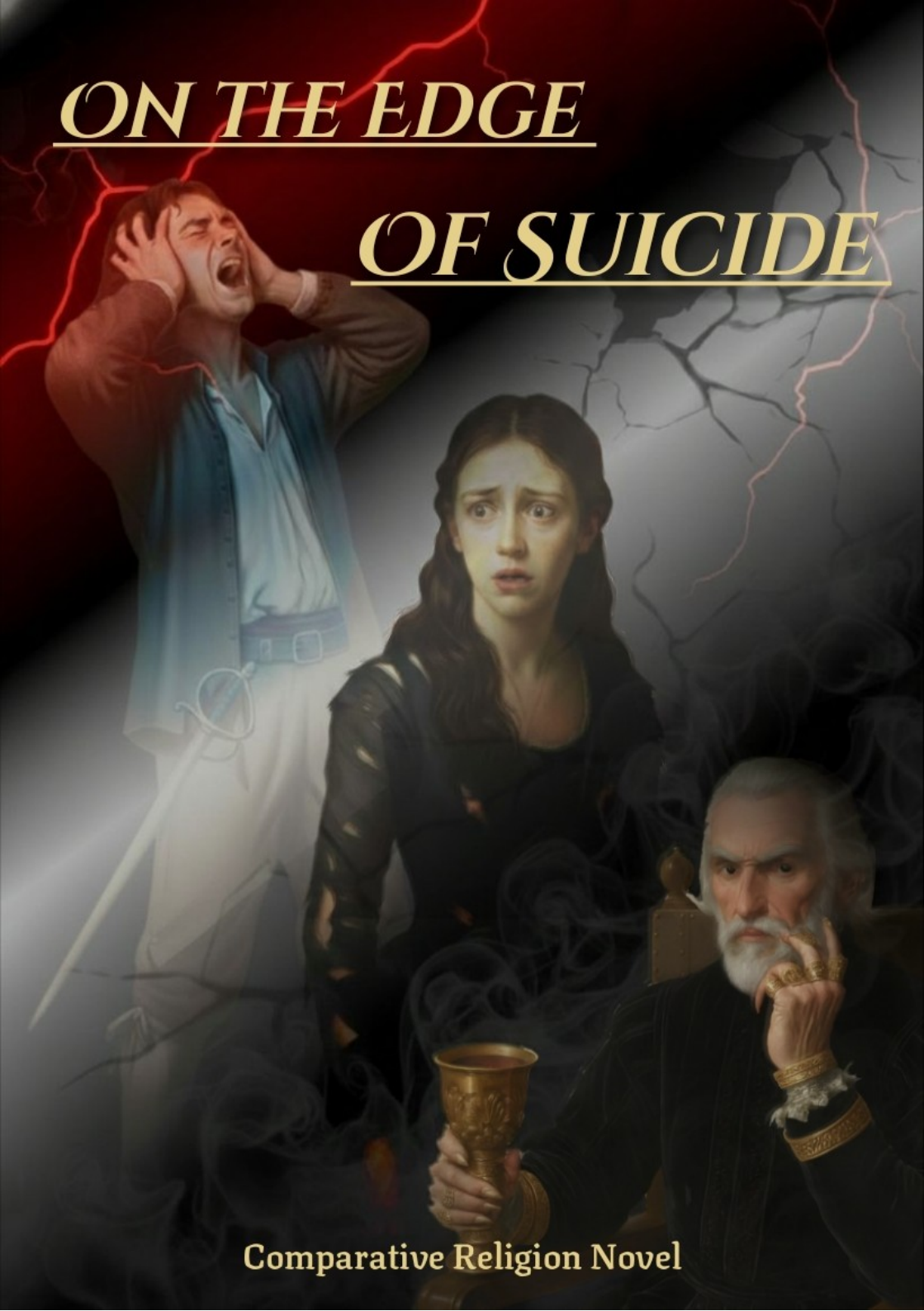
ON THE EDGE OF SUICIDE



Comparative Religion Novel

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Introduction

"One may grow up not knowing the truth, and they are called **ignorant**.
Some may grow up not wanting to know the truth, and they are called **bigots**.
One may be born not knowing the meaning of light, and they are called **blind**.
Some are born not knowing the meaning of sound, and they are called **deaf**.
Others are born not knowing the meaning of color, and they are called **colorblind**.
Some are born not knowing the meaning of logic, and they are called **insane**.
And someone may be born not knowing the meaning of love, and they are called a **psychopath**.
This last one knows **no** emotion except for their own **self**-interest; they view others merely as **tools** or **obstacles**. Worse yet, if they are intelligent, you will witness the unthinkable.
……..
After writing my novel, I noticed striking similarities between the character of the tyrant '**Jonathas**' and the tyrant '**Benjamin Netanyahu**.' Even their names—by pure coincidence!—carry the same meaning: **Jonathas** = **Netanyahu** = **Gift of God**.
I was even surprised to find that the name of Netanyahu's older brother—whom he considers his role model—is '**Yonatan**,' a name that carries the exact same meaning!
And now, dear reader, I leave the novel to you, to discover these strange parallels for yourself."

Chapter One:

One Village But Two Worlds

Her scream tore through the night sky like a blade, ripping apart the suffocating darkness that cloaked everything. Tears streamed from her eyes—not so much from the raw agony of childbirth as from the deeper, more ancient pain of life itself. Despite the elegance of her gown and the gleam of precious jewels adorning her, she was utterly alone in the wild emptiness, giving birth to her firstborn son with no mother, no companion, no witness.
And where are you, his father? WHY ARE YOU, Father?

She cried out again—a raw, guttural cry plunged her into the depths of her memory less than two years earlier, when...

...she suddenly became aware of the sound of hooves rising behind her. Before she could turn, her veil was snatched away, lifted high into the air. Instinctively, she flung the basket from her hands, hoping she could hide her wind-tossed brown hair with her pale fingers as she cried out, “Holy Virgin!” Her eyes met a pair of hard, black eyes staring down at her from atop the horse, and she heard a cold whisper drift toward her:

“What I thought was an old man… was a woman indeed—young, even.”
Then he barked, “And what is it you’re hiding under that cursed cloth?”
She choked out, “Shut your mouth, you insolent boy… give it back!”

The veil fell. A strange smile flickered across the young man's face, and Catherina, in her innocence, rushed straight toward her doom. She never reached the scarf. Instead, she felt herself seized by her habit and lifted onto the horse's back, the sting of lashes burning into her skin. She stared in disbelief at the silent onlookers—faces without features, people without conscience.

The horse surged forward, dragging behind it the sobs of a nun being carried into the unknown. With every pounding step, the monastery faded, warmth turning to ice. She screamed until her throat burned, but no ear answered her. The man on the saddle remained still, as if what he carried behind him was not a human soul, but a sack of goods.

Her head drooped forward, swaying with the horse's relentless rhythm, her hair falling like a curtain of silk, blocking her view except for the merciless hooves striking the earth. In the narrow mountain passes, her cries dwindled, replaced by a tense, breathless silence.

When the horses finally stopped, she tried to flee, but cold hands were quicker than her hope. She fought fiercely with her bare hands, slipping free for a heartbeat before the men closed in from every side. She stumbled back—straight into the young man's solid frame. His hand clamped onto her hair with brutal force, cutting off her scream. And with that sharp, merciless gesture, her resistance ended.

The next morning, a warm sunbeam slipped through the stained-glass window and fell upon the empty bed in the

monastery. Though it found no one to warm, it did not grieve, nor shrink, nor even change; Warm it was—but never gentle. The only one who had ever believed in its gentleness was now locked in the darkness of a cellar carved into the mountain beside the village.

Those honey-colored eyes shed tears by the dozens, accompanied by a small, sorrowful whimper. Though she curled tightly into herself, the cold of the ground seeped into her bones through her thin garment, while the smell of dampness and decay filled her lungs, as if she lay in a grave waiting for its lid to close.

Light barely reached her—only faint rays slipping through rust-covered iron bars; Still, they insist to stand firm, like stone, before the lost youth of the prisoners.

“Come now, child, hush… you’ve cried all night. Aren’t you tired? As for me, my head is splitting…”
Another woman snapped,
“Hit her. Silence her by force. You’ve been coddling her for hours while she whines!”

She lunged toward Catherina, but a third woman caught her arm.
“Leave her. We all cried at the beginning.”
“I didn’t cry. My mother was like this, and life is like this. I hate these foolish girls!”

A young man’s voice rose from the back:
“Elisabetha, shut up. At least she doesn’t scream as loudly as you.”

Catherina covered her head, trying to stifle the sobs that would not stop. She chased the image of that accursed young man out of her mind, but it clung to her memory like a stain—black hair, black eyes, set into the face of a man barely twenty, yet his cruelty and savagery far exceeded his years.

“Just because he’s a gang child—does that mean he can do whatever he wants?!”
Her voice burst out of her suddenly, raw and trembling. The woman beside her, the one who had been trying to soothe her, replied:

“I told you—he’s the nephew of the gang leader. Of course he behaves this way.”
“And even if he were the leader himself… won’t he die and be judged for his crimes like everyone else?!”
Elisabetha scoffed, her tone dripping with mockery. “Let your God save you from here first. Then we’ll see what He does after we’re dead.”

A harsh, cutting laughter filled the cell, while Catherina sank deeper into her torment, clinging to the memory of the warm morning she had lived only yesterday.
It felt as though a wall of solid stone had risen forever between her and the monastery. She cried out for the life she had lost—until a brutal slap smashed her face against the wall, accompanied by a shriek that nearly split her ears:

“I told you to shut up! Can’t you understand?!”
Catherina’s eyes met Elisabetha’s hateful glare. Blood trickled from her nose, the shock hollowed her voice before she could even defend herself. A few burning seconds passed before Elisabetha strutted back to her place in the cell, her steps full of pride, the echo of her high-five with the red-haired boy rang as they shared a mocking grin.

Time seemed frozen in the cellar—each hour identical to the one before and after. Only occasionally, during the day, the voices of weapons-makers echoed as they descended into the large underground chamber to drop off a shipment or collect another. They never spared a glance for the prisoners shoved into the corner, nor remembered that anyone was exiled down here at all.

Three identical days passed, during which Catherina tasted neither sleep nor food. The others, delighted by her misery, took advantage of her silence to seize her share of the meals without even asking. Her portion became nothing more than an extra prize they fought over greedily, mocking her foolishness and leaving her to whisper her prayers whenever they tired of tormenting her.

When the sky darkened on the third day, and its bitterness settled over the cellar, every heart tightened at the sound of the dreaded jailer’s footsteps descending the stairs. As always, they waited, tense, for the name of the night’s victim. Then his coarse voice cracked through the air like thunder:
“The crying mutt! Out. He wants you tonight.”

And so, fleeing from fire into flame, the prisoners shoved Catherina's frail body toward the jailer's grip with eager hands, jeering at her—especially when she collapsed unconscious the moment she heard her name.

Cold water jolted her awake. She opened her eyes to find the boots of that young "master" standing before her. She trembled, forcing her exhausted body upright. Her hand rose instinctively to smooth her hair before she steadied herself and lifted her gaze slowly. Droplets slid from her drenched hair down her pale, weakened face. The moment her fading eyes met his dark, merciless ones, his shout exploded:

"What is this?! Is this really her? Look how you've ruined her—thin and hideous!"
His anger flared hotter. "Why didn't you feed her?! You've ruined my mood, you son of a—"
The jailer stammered, "I… I give her the food, sir, but she—"

The young master cut him off with a thunderous roar. "I don't want your excuses, you worthless fool!
Arthurus—give this idiot twenty lashes. And know this, jailer: this is only the beginning. If I don't find her looking like a flower in two days…"

Catherina was thrown back into the cell, collapsing in a heap under the bewildered stares of the others. Their mocking laughter stung her spirit like salt on an open wound. But soon they fell silent, listening with vicious delight to the twenty lashes echoing through the cellar, exchanging glances so sharp they

nearly leapt from their eyes.

Hours later, the jailer returned, dragging his feet, biting down on a piece of wood to endure his pain. Everyone froze. Catherina felt her blood turn to ice, her tears drying in her eyes. Without a word, he stormed into the cell, seized her violently, and dragged her into a neighboring one—no less foul or harsh than the first. She lifted her head to find the jailer towering above her, cracking his whip:

“Listen well, you cursed girl. If you don’t eat, I’ll make sure this will be cut by your face.”

Under the jailer’s burning glare and the threat of his merciless whip, Catherina had no choice but to lift the food to her trembling lips. To her heart’s eye, it felt like swallowing fire—food stolen, forced upon her, defiling the purity she had lived by all her life. With every bite, she felt the weight of divine anger pressing upon her.

Three days passed. Catherina was forced to eat again and again until she felt she might burst. Her five cellmates watched from across the bars, mocking her suffering as though it erased their own. Each day, one of them was taken to be tortured by the young master, returning with wounds and destroyed feelings, yet smiling mechanically as if returning from a holiday.
The only mercy Catherina found was the solitude of her small cell; safe from their hands. She watched them with pity, tracing crosses in the air for them, unable to understand how a handsome young man and four beautiful girls could come to see

life through the eyes of beasts—mocking anyone who still clung to a shred of humanity, laughing at the very idea that someone might have a right to grieve.

A whisper escaped her stiffened lips:
“Will I become like them one day… mocking whoever comes after me?”
Her eyes filled as she murmured:
“Let them laugh. I will resist, even if it kills me… or so I hope.”

Two days later, the jailer came to take Catherina to the young master’s chamber. He led her through the cursed corridors, their luxury nothing but a mask hiding the rot beneath. He shoved her inside and forced her to her knees, standing behind her in tense anticipation, hoping the master would forgive his earlier failure.

The young master approached with arrogant steps, examining her from above, nudging her with his boot. She dared not speak. The stench of wine on his clothes suffocated her, and she longed for the scent of incense from her days of purity.

At last he muttered, his voice thick: “Well… I’ll forgive you this time.”
The jailer kissed his hand and left, relieved. Catherina broke into tears, knowing she would not leave unharmed this time.

The narcissistic young master opened another bottle of wine and tossed it toward her, ordering her to fill his glass while he hurled words at her that sting even more than the smell of that awful drink.

The next day, the jailer dragged Catherina back to the communal cell, cracking his whip as he barked:
“If this _*_ doesn't eat, all of you will be punished!”

Catherina dragged her feet in misery until she reached her corner of the cell, turning her face toward the wall in confusion—should she press her hand to her bleeding skin, wipe the tears streaming down her cheeks, or cover her ears to block out the crude voices echoing through the suffocating cellar.

Months slipped by, each day grinding her down while the savage young master remained unchanged—untouched by mercy, untroubled by conscience. Life’s wheel crushed Catherina without hesitation until her tears dried, and even the others grew tired of mocking her. Reality smothered emotion.

Purity became nothing more than a memory tied to the lost monastery. Kindness turned into a dream she no longer expected to receive. She learned to defend her food, to return Elisabetha’s slaps, and to spit in the face of Jorvoss—the red-haired boy—whenever he cast those vile looks at her. Their sharp laughter became nothing more than the nightly chirping of crickets — annoying, but familiar.

On the other side of her suffering, she began to see the young master for what he truly was: a spoiled, selfish boy, too weak to restrain his impulses. Even the smell of wine—once repulsive—became a scent she recognized without flinching. The jailer became nothing more than a tool, a presence she no longer bothered to look at or read.

Reality ruled over everything—except one thing. Catherina still prayed before she ate and before she slept, despite the chorus of mocking voices. Rescue seemed nowhere on the horizon, yet she clung to her prayers deep within her, embracing them whenever she could, hoping the Lord would turn His gaze away from what she had been forced to endure… and save her someday.

As if all she had suffered were not enough, one day the resentful prisoners waited for the drunken jailer to fall into a stupor and agreed on a vile plan. No matter how Catherina screamed or fought, no one heard her; Five against one…

But reality intervened, the door burst open, and a man rushed down the stairs, his footsteps shaking the cellar as he shouted:
“George! Bring me the brown-haired one.”

The five sprang away from her at once, whispering:

“But… it’s not her turn today. Isn’t it too early anyway?”

After more shouting, the drunken jailer finally stirred. Muttering curses, he staggered toward the cell. When he heard Catherina crying, he hurled insults at her, seized her by the hair with a grip like iron, and dragged her as if she were an object rather than a person. She wailed helplessly until he threw her into the young master’s room and slammed the door behind her.

Catherina collapsed to the floor, clutching her scalp—her hair nearly torn out—curling in pain as she sobbed. When her tears

finally ran dry, she forced herself to stand and look around. The room was empty. Confusion washed over her; he had never left her alone here for this long.
It was just a room with decent wooden furniture—perhaps even beautiful, had it not also been the place of her torment, the chamber where her darkest moments lived. She shook her head, pushing the memories aside, and rushed to the wide-open window. She leaned into it, letting her gaze escape into the vast sky she longed for. The cold mountain wind rushed in, brushing her weary face and playing with her tired hair.

She clasped her hands, praying from the depths of her heart, her voice trembling. But time betrayed her. She heard the door open quietly and close behind her. She stiffened, but did not turn, continuing her whispered prayer as the unsteady footsteps approached.

Just as she braced herself for the worst, the sound of a wooden chair scraping under a collapsing weight struck her ears.

Catherina kept praying—again and again—until the storm inside her began to settle. At last she gathered her nerves and turned slowly to face him, wondering how he had left her untouched and silent for so long. But when she saw him slumped in a deep, twisted sleep on the chair, the heavy scent of wine rising from him like a signature, she exhaled in relief and sank quietly to the floor.

As time passed, she realized he would catch a chill if he remained like this. She bit her lip, rose cautiously, and approached him with hesitant steps. She touched his arm and whispered, her voice

trembling: “You should get up… it’s cold. You’ll freeze here.”

He opened his bloodshot eyes and lifted his hand to strike her, but she stepped back just in time. His strength failed him; his hand dropped, and his eyelids sagged. He was nearly unconscious, limp as a man without will. She could not understand why he had summoned her in such a state—he had never done anything like this before.

Yes, she could take revenge. She could kill him in silence. Or at the very least, leave him to the cold. She stood there, torn between thoughts.

There he was—the criminal who had shattered her dreams, stolen the light from her eyes, torn her from her family, broken her, wounded her, and still stood between her and safety. Now he lay helpless before her, his life in her hands, with no guard and no witness. Should she do it? Should she end him and free the others?

“Come on, Catherina… he is an enemy of the Lord. Ending him is the least he deserves.”

The voice thundered inside her. She gathered her strength, stepped behind the chair, and gripped his collar with both hands, preparing herself—summoning every memory of what he had done to her. She drew a deep breath that filled her chest.

"Once I’m sure he’s dead.. I’ll throw myself from the window."
But at that moment, her mother’s voice reading echoed in her

ears:“But I say to you: Love your enemies, bless those who curse you, do good to those who hate you, and pray for those who mistreat you and persecute you.”

She clenched her teeth and hissed:
“How easy it was for you to read that, Mother!
Look at me now… even Christ Himself—if He were in my place—would change His words! But…”
She lowered her head, correcting herself:
“What am I saying? Christ faced His enemies, endured them, and never changed His words…”

She swallowed hard.
“And taking my own life… that is a grave sin. ‘Thou shalt not kill.’ ‘Thou shalt not kill.’”
She stared at his harsh face, searching for a decision that would satisfy her anger before it satisfied righteousness.
“Is there no mercy from God for someone in my state?”

Her hands loosened. Tears welled in her eyes.
“Should God make an exception for me… or should I obey Him?”
For a minute she held her breath, suffocating under the weight of the choice. Then her fingers slowly released his collar. She closed her eyes and dragged her feet—heavy as iron—toward the window, shutting it. She lit the fireplace, the crackle of burning wood sharpening her tears. After another inner battle, she forced her hands to pull a blanket over him as he remained unconscious on the chair.

She looked at him, boiling with hatred, then turned away sharply

—as if Christ Himself had placed a wall of iron between her and vengeance. She sat down, reciting her prayers through clenched teeth, forcing herself to pray for him, fulfilling the commandment she had understood that night more deeply than ever. And she waited for her fate with dread.

Two hours passed. Then three. Night fell, and he remained sunk in drunken sleep. Someone knocked on the door several times, but left after hearing his unmistakable snoring. Catherina stayed silent, savoring the rare blessing of being outside the filthy cell—sitting safely by the fire, on a comfortable chair, with no guard and no mocking voices ringing in her ears.

The thought of escape tempted her. Her mind spun stories of a happy ending to this impossible adventure. But her fear of pain was far stronger than her desire to open the door.
At midnight, the master stirred. He groaned, adjusting his posture, and muttered thickly: “Arthurus… my back… oh, why did you leave me on this chair? Come rub my back.”

Catherina hesitated, then approached him quietly, afraid of provoking him. She began massaging his back with tense hands. Two minutes passed before she felt safe enough to think he hadn’t noticed. But then he murmured: “You know… the wine makes your hands feel like a woman’s.”

Silence fell—strange, heavy. Suspicion crept into him. At last he turned his head. And when he saw Catherina, he jolted upright, shouting without thinking:
“Who are you?!”

“Me? I’m Catherina.”

He drew several sharp breaths, then regained his tone:
“What… what are you doing here? Where’s Arthurus?”

“I don’t know. You summoned me yesterday… then you came in and fell asleep immediately.”

He touched his neck quickly, thinking aloud:
“She’s been here since midday?!”

He swallowed, looking away. For a moment he seemed lost in thought, rubbing the blanket that covered him between his fingers, unable to hide his confusion. Then he tossed it onto the bed in one abrupt motion and regained the sharpness in his eyes.

“So… you said your name is Catherina?”

She answered with burning bitterness:
“Yes. Not ‘the wretch,’ not ‘the mutt,’ not ‘the daughter of—’”

He smirked with a mocking curl of his lips, paused for a moment, then said with cold cruelty:
“I don’t like the name Catherina… it’s dull and ridiculous.”

She whispered under her breath—too softly for him to hear, “And your name hardly suits you either.”

He slapped his hand against his thigh. “Yes. I’ll change your name

to Kati. From now on, your name is Kati."

Johannes rose and glanced toward the fireplace. "Listen, Kati, I…"

But instead of finishing the sentence, he exhaled sharply. "I have a splitting headache. I'm going back to sleep."

He shot her a strange look while holding his head, then lifted his chin and ordered with a dismissive flick of his hand:
"Back to the cell, you…
Ah—Arthurus! Arthurus!"

The door swung open almost instantly, Arthurus still half-asleep. Johannes signaled with his eyes, and Arthurus grabbed Catherina by the wrist, dragging her out. She stood frozen, terror flooding back into her veins at the memory of Jorvoss and the others. Arthurus barked:
"Move, you—what's wrong with you?!"

She whispered in despair, her face drained of color. "No, they'll attack me, no, no…"

Arthurus released her to fetch the whip.She cried out, pleading:
"Please, Johannes… that wretch in the cell won't leave me alone"

Johannes lifted his weary eyes, yawning, and muttered in broken words:
"How… dare you… call me by my name…?"

He stared at her with dull irritation just as the crack of the whip

echoed through the room and Arthurus shouted:
“Move, you—!”

And so Catherina returned to the cell, defeated, the rare chance slipping through her fingers. But at least the “crickets” asleep—huddled together—for warmth in the freezing air.

She tiptoed to her corner, leaned against the cold wall, and tried to summon sleep with the memory of the fireplace and the crackling wood.

But of course, she couldn’t sleep—not with the cold gnawing at her bones. Her mind churned through everything that had happened: her decision, the commandments, Christ’s endurance to the very end… and Johannes—his strange look, his obvious confusion. She had never seen him sober before. She hadn’t noticed it at the time, but the fact that he had thought about what to name her… that alone was something worth noticing.

She thought and thought, her teeth chattering and chattering, until dawn broke and the precious silence ended. Jorvoss glared at her with a tyrant’s grin:
“You escaped us yesterday, but not today. Just wait.”

He winked, while the women resumed their cycle of mockery. After breakfast, everyone watched eagerly for the jailer to start drinking—everyone except Catherina, who swallowed hard, hugging her trembling body, praying helplessly.

Hours passed. The weapons-makers left. The bottle clinked onto

the table. The jailer sat, drinking as usual. But the routine shattered when heavy, deliberate footsteps echoed down the stairs. The jailer forced himself upright, rubbing his eyes—then suddenly snapped to attention.
“Welcome, sir! You only had to call me as usual!”

By the lantern’s glow, Johannes cast a sharp look toward the cell and said in a commanding tone:
“Why did you put that son of a— with my girls?”

The jailer stammered, “It’s easier for me when—”
Johannes cut him off. “Fifty lashes. Then move him. And don’t you dare put him with them again.”

He left immediately. The jailer scratched his head, grumbling as he dragged Jorvoss away:
“Which one of you told him, you—?”

Everyone turned toward Catherina without hesitation. The jailer growled:
“You cursed face… ever since you came, you’ve brought me nothing but trouble. You’ll see if I don’t get back at you.”

Jorvoss muttered, “I’d forget that if I were you… looks like she’s the one who’ll get back at us.”
The jailer snapped, “Who asked for your advice, you—?!”

And indeed, Jorvoss was whipped and thrown into the other cell. The women winced at his pain and glared at Catherina, whispering curses. She didn’t know whether to rejoice or cry.

What had just happened pointed straight back to last night. She whispered in disbelief: “He did something for me… he actually did something for me…”

She spent hours wrestling with her thoughts—doubting, believing, doubting again—until the door burst open and Arthurus’s harsh voice thundered from the stairs:
“Bring the brown-haired one!”

The women gasped in fury. Catherina swallowed hard, rose,
and walked with empty eyes down the only path she knew. She entered the warm room to find Johannes sitting on the window ledge, sipping his wine with smug confidence. She waited for his signal. After a moment, he pointed to another glass on the table.
“So… Kati or Catherina?”

He smiled slyly. She answered, “I was baptized Catherina, but my mother calls me Kati.”
He chuckled lightly. “Alright then, Kati. Come sit here.”

She sat beside him on the window ledge. He stared into her eyes for several seconds until she looked away in embarrassment. His lips moved with a piercing gaze:
“You hate me.”

She whispered, hesitant, “Do you expect me to bless you?”

He stretched his legs out, leaning back with a broad grin.
“But you took care of me last night—without anyone forcing you.”

She inhaled deeply, gripping her glass. “Yes. Out of obedience to The Lord’s commandments, nothing more.”
"Who do you mean by lord?"
She replied in confusion "Of course, God"
“You said ‘God’? What is God?”

Catherina lowered her eyes, her face flushing, trying to shield her heart from the mockery she expected. Johannes raised his brows.
“Why don’t you answer? What or Who is God? I heard you say it —‘God.’ Did I hear wrong?”

She lifted her eyes, checking whether he was mocking her. He snapped impatiently:
“What’s with that empty stare? Are you going to speak or—?”
Confusion washed over her features as she whispered, voice trembling:
“You truly live without knowing God? The Redeemer?!”
He paused, studying her words, then said:
“Well, I’m not one of the animals.”

Her face flushed again, swelling with indignation. Johannes quickly added:
“No! I mean—I’m not one of the… the… what do they call them?”
He looked upward, trying to recall. She asked with a feeling of insult: “You mean the villagers?”

His face lit up. He raised his glass.
“Ah, yes. We don’t use that word. We say animals, or sheep, or… whatever.”
She pressed again, “So you truly don’t know who God is?”
He narrowed his eyes.

“From the way you speak… He sounds like a person?"

Catherina’s smile blossomed from the depths of her heart; at last —after months—someone was speaking to her about the Lord without mockery. Her eyes regained their lost shine as she answered:
“God is our heavenly Father—the One who created us all in His image…”

“Created us? What does that even mean?”
He burst into laughter. “Am I the only one here who actually has parents?!”
She ignored his laughter and replied with calm firmness:
“Yes, He created us. As for my parents… well, how could they have created me when they themselves were surprised by my features the moment I was born?”

He raised a brow and teased, “Surprised?”
But she continued, delighted to explain:
“Yes. They didn’t know what I would look like. They waited for the Lord’s will with patience and faith.”

He chuckled slyly. “Seems the Lord disappointed them in the end!”
Then, with exaggerated gestures, “So was there someone inside her belly crafting you—this ‘God’ of yours?”
She shot back, defensive; “Johannes, He isn’t a person like you and me!”
“Like who, then?”

She paused, thinking, then answered:
“Like no one He created. He is in heaven, yet by His knowledge and presence He is with us—here, now, and in every time and place.”
He glanced toward the sky. “I don’t see Him here. Not even up there.”
She placed her hand gently over her heart.
“No eye can behold Him. But you can feel His presence here—through the eyes of faith.”

He struck his chest with a fist. “I don’t feel anything either. Why doesn’t He show Himself so we can see Him and speak to Him?”
She looked at him with innocent eyes, spreading her arms as she explained:
“Because His majesty is too great for our mortal sight to bear. If He revealed Himself, we would melt away under the awe of His holiness.”

Johannes exploded into laughter—loud, unrestrained—then wiped his eyes and finally said:
“You actually believe what you’re saying?!”
She swallowed her irritation. “Of course. And from experience.”

He rubbed his flushed face. “And what experience is that? Tell me, so I can try it myself.”
“Whenever I pray and call upon Him, I feel Him near me—listening. And I feel peace filling my soul.”
“I can’t see your fantasies. I want something I can witness myself—touch myself!”

He rubbed his fingers together while she glanced at the chair he had slept on the night before. Then she said:
“Last night, I prayed for a long time while you slept. I asked the Father again and again that He—”

He shifted uncomfortably, rolling his eyes:
“Don’t tell me you think your ‘Father’ is the reason I’m talking to you now. If that’s the case, I might as well believe He created you and used your parents to raise you… for my amusement!”

Catherina flushed with embarrassment while Johannes burst into laughter.
“Incredible how naïve you are! Listen—I’m talking to you because I was Bored. And I drank all day yesterday because I was Bored. That’s all!”
Disbelief flared across her face and voice.
“Bored?! But You Do Whatever you want—Absolutely Anything!”
He tapped his fingers on his glass, then after a moment said:

“And that’s exactly why I’m bored. I’m always looking for something new. That’s why I spoke to you today.
But never mind—mocking your silly ideas has improved my mood.”
Catherina fell silent, disappointment weighing on her. Johannes added: “You seem to **love** this subject quite a lot.”

Her voice cracked as she wiped her eyes and said:
“Of course I do. I *dedicated* my life to serving the Kingdom… until **you** came—*violating* the sanctity of my vow and shattering my dreams with your greed.”

Johannes's face lit up with wicked delight.
"Oh? I shattered them, did I? What wonderful news—worthy of celebration!
Raise your glass! Let's drink to saving you from such nonsense!"

Catherina shot to her feet and slammed her glass onto the table.
"Do whatever you want—just let me go. I don't want to speak to you!
You may enslave my body, but you will never own my soul!"

He sipped his wine coolly, then lifted his chin with arrogant command:
"If you don't celebrate with me in three seconds, you'll see exactly how I'll make you join your broken dreams."

A shiver ran through her at the sharpness of his tone. She could already feel the lash burning across her skin. She swallowed her fear, sat back down, and tapped her trembling glass against his.
He smirked:"See? Power gives me the right to own anything in you.
Very well—I'll be generous and ignore what you said… this time only."
He drank with satisfaction, then added in a calmer voice:
"And that black outfit you used to wear… I thought you were a man at first."
She inhaled sharply before replying, "It's the habit of the nuns."

"Nuns? What's the—?"
"They are women who devote their lives to worshiping the Lord in the monastery—far from the filth and evil of the world."

“Hmm… the monastery… is that the building with the wooden thing the crows perch on?”
She stared at him in disgust.
“It’s called a cross! The symbol of the *Redeemer*!”
He grinned stupidly. “I don’t see anyone crucified on it. Does your Lord *enjoy* that method of killing?”

She exhaled angrily. “No. It’s the symbol of the cross on which the Son of God was crucified to redeem humanity!”

His eyes widened. “God has a son too?! Didn’t you say He isn’t a person like you and me?”
“Yes—His Son is the Word made flesh, who came down to us with the message from the Father!”
He leaned forward, shouting: “What?! Imagine my father sending me to the village dressed like… like those villagers… to tell them something, then watching like an idiot while they crucify me!”

He burst into mocking laughter. “No sane man would do that! And did the son die after the crucifixion?”
She hesitated, wishing she didn’t have to answer, but forced the words out: “Yes. But He conquered death by rising on the third day.”

“Really? And where is He now?”
She answered curtly, hoping he’d drop the subject:
“He ascended into heaven, and He will return one day to judge the living and the dead.”
But he continued carelessly: “And the nuns wait for Him in the

monastery? They put the cross up high so He knows where His followers are and comes down to them?"

Catherina was stunned by the absurdity of his thoughts. He went on: "You'd think the Father would warn His son beforehand instead of letting Him get nailed like that. The Father is everywhere—He should know everything.

Meanwhile the poor son loses all his father's powers and becomes human like us—so human they crucified him. If my father did that to me, I'd hate him and seek revenge!"
"You don't understand the mystery of the Incarnation! The Son came by His own will. He healed the sick and raised the dead with miracles—yet He accepted suffering for our sake!"

He leaned in so close their faces nearly touched, whispering: "But He was flesh and bone—not everywhere, and He didn't create every human like His Father, right?"
She recoiled from his gaze as he continued, now with a strange seriousness:
"Look—even though I'm strong, no one in our gang asks me for anything. They all go to my uncle, the leader. He's the one with all the power—not just a part of it like me."

Confused by his gaze, her hand reached out to search for the cross that was usually around her neck, as he added:
"So it occurred to me to advise you to rely on the Lord and not on his son. Understand?"
Catherina answered helplessly: "The Father and the Son are one—of the same eternal essence…"

But Johannes didn't bother listening. He stood and said:
"Now I understand why you people never get bored—you invent these wild stories about a king and a prince dying for their servants, just to comfort yourselves in your misery.
Ha! Even I enjoyed this amusing tale!"

He stretched and called out: "Arthurus! Take her."
Arthurus glanced at her and found her staring into her glass.
"That was quick. Did it upset you?"
He yawned. "No… I just don't feel like anything."
Arthurus asked as he approached, "Maybe you're ill. Should I fetch a doctor?"
Johannes replied dully, "No. I'm fine."

Catherina took a few steps toward the door, then suddenly turned back, her voice ringing with unexpected strength:
"You're bored because you live in a Cage of Your Own Sins!
You have everything—but your soul is Shackled in Chains."

He shot her a sharp, mocking look.
"I Am the one living in a cage and chains?!
From where I'm standing, You Are the one in a Cage—and here you are, going right back to it!"

Arthurus shoved Catherina harshly and dragged her out, slamming the door behind them. Johannes exhaled, murmuring under his breath: "How did she know I was being held here??"

Catherina returned to the cellar, where every gaze struck her like

a slap. They had all caught the strong scent of wine clinging to her. Jealousy burned openly on the faces of the shivering women —eyes full of hatred, ready to tear her apart now that she was receiving what none of them could reach.

But Catherina… she was living in another world entirely.

Chapter Two:

The Master, Up Close

Catherina's "turn" had transformed into conversations—exchanges of words and glimpses into two opposite worlds. She had grown accustomed to his provoking tone, and he had grown accustomed to her face, a quiet companion to whom he whispered his curiosities and thoughts that never quite matched his narcissistic nature. And yet, Catherina found in her captor the only presence that eased the darkness around her.

Then suddenly, the chain broke. Several days passed without anyone being summoned. It was clear the master was unwell. Catherina, however, knew his ailment—and searched in her spirituality for a cure, hoping he might rise from his boredom and abandon his cruelty.
Thousands of imagined conversations spun in her mind, as though she lived in a world shared only between them—though certainly not a world of love, as the others assumed.

The moment came abruptly when Arthurus finally called for her. Catherina hurried to Johannes's room, where he lay bedridden. She approached with trembling steps, her face pale with cold and fever. The moment she entered, Johannes snapped irritably:
"You're sick too?!"

"What's strange is not that I'm sick—I barely sleep from the cold. What's strange is that you are sick, when you have warmth and comfort."

Johannes scowled. “Arthurus… take her away.”
But after a few steps, he changed his mind.
“No. Leave. Close the door.”

He fixed his domineering gaze on her.
“Kati, I brought you here to take care of me while I’m ill.
And I expect you to do it properly—if you want to stay warm.”
She coughed. “It’s good you trust me… because I trust in the Lord.”
“I don’t want you speaking today.”

At his commanding tone, Catherina fell silent and began tending to him without a word. She didn’t mind—not if it meant warmth. Naturally, Johannes noticed the fever burning in her as well. He wrestled with his cruelty for a moment before muttering through clenched teeth:
“There are blankets in the drawer. Take one.”

Catherina’s face lit up. She rushed to snatch the blanket, whispering a quiet prayer of thanks as she wrapped her trembling body in it. She sat hugging it, savoring a small taste of humanity she had begun to believe she no longer deserved.

Her chair was beside the bed—sometimes tending to him, sometimes gazing at the blue sky. After a while, she gathered enough courage to ask: “What is that sound… like dripping… distant and uneven?”

From under the covers he replied, “Look out the window.”
She stared at him, puzzled. He clarified:

“Look, and you’ll know.”

She leaned out toward the valley and saw a line of people moving slowly in and out of a cave far below. Moments passed before she understood—they were being whipped to keep working in the forced-labor mine. She clapped a hand over her mouth, squeezed her eyes shut, and recoiled instantly, sinking back into her chair without a word.

Johannes grinned broadly.
“If I ever get tired of you all, that’s where you’ll end up! Ha! What do you think of that?”
She lowered her head. “My opinion doesn’t matter.”
“Ah, well said!”
She exhaled, gathering her strength “Are you still bored?”
He let out a short, mocking laugh “Why else would I be sick?”
Her voice burst out:“I thought of something that might cure your boredom, and—”
He cut her off sharply “If it’s about the Lord, don’t tell me.”

She hurried to correct herself, clasping her hands.
“I—I’ll sing for you. A song to lift your mood.”
He lowered the blankets. “What an idea. I’ve never made you sing for me before. Is your voice any good?”

“You’ll be the judge.”
“If I don’t like it, you’ll stop immediately.”
“I’m waiting for your signal.”

She drew a deep breath and began chanting one of David’s

psalms—one she loved and knew by heart. Every moment she expected him to snap at her once he realized she was singing about the Lord, but he said nothing. She continued, growing more confident, pouring her heart into the melody… until she finished.
Silence.
Only the sound of heavy breathing.
He had fallen asleep.
She sighed deeply and leaned back in disappointment.

Two hours later, he woke, stretched, scratched his chest, and looked at her with a mocking smile.
“Oh, it’s you, deceiver. Your voice is awful, by the way.”

She countered firmly:
“So awful that you didn’t tell me to stop—and even fell asleep. I’ve never heard of anyone sleeping through an awful voice.”
He smirked “I was listening to the words. I got bored into sleep. But it was a comfortable sleep, especially while sick.”

Catherina shifted uncomfortably as he continued:
“Sleep is the only state where I feel at ease. Sometimes I think of sleeping forever—just to rest. What do you think? Should I end my life?”

She answered firmly, though her voice trembled with the weight of the topic: “If you did that, you’d be choosing a path of suffering.”
He glared, so she quickly added, “And so would I.”
He snapped:

“I speak of rest and sleep, and you speak of suffering?!”
“That’s because true rest is for the **pure-heart-ed**—those who love and **do** good. But criminals, killers, thieves… their path leads to **darkness**.”
“Good you told me, I’ll take a lantern with me!”
He shot her a mocking look.
“That’s assuming such a place even exists.
Tell me—do you villagers live like animals, terrified of the dark?”

She clarified: “No. It means the One who created you will raise you again for accountability—so you answer for everything you’ve done.
Every time you think it’s over, Christ judges again. ‘He who lives by the sword shall perish by the sword.’”

He chuckled.“You like that line, don’t you? Remember—you’ll be there with me… by your own admission.”
Catherina fell silent, grinding her teeth in anger. He laughed louder.
“Come on—there’s no punishment. What proof do you have that any of this is real?”
“Because the world would *never* be just *unless* **you**—and your gang—and everyone **like** you—were **held** accountable!”

He scoffed “And **why** should the world be just? The law of the world is simple: the **strong** devour the weak. **Everything** lives by that law. Should animals go to punishment too?”

“You **Wouldn’t** say that if You were the weak one!”
“Answer me—do animals go to punishment?”

“Animals don’t… they don’t have eternal souls like humans.”

“So animals never get justice. Why should humans?
You invent stories to imagine you’ve avenged yourselves on us—your powerful **masters**, you miserable slaves!”
He burst into cruel laughter.

Catherina finally snapped, her anger barely contained:
“I don’t know about animals. But I know this—your soul is tormented with emptiness *despite* all your power. ‘*What does it profit a man if he gains the whole world and loses his soul?*’ You’re the one thinking of ending your life!”

Johannes fell silent, his laughter dying out. She continued:
“Should I laugh at you now? Mock you the way you mock everyone?”
“Try it and see.”
She pressed on, voice tight:
“Ending your life would only mean you failed at living. You failed to find meaning. No one envies you—not even with all your strength. What matters is your heart, not what you hold in your hands. People—”
Johannes exploded: “Catherina, you’re starting to anger me!”

A minute of tense breathing passed. Then he inhaled slowly, calming himself, before looking at her with a hateful, triumphant glare.
“At least my power will strip the joy from your heart—until you wish for death as I do.”
He lifted his chin and ordered coldly: “Put that blanket aside.

(Then, with quiet malice) So you won't be too shocked by the cold when you're sent to the mine. Al—"

Before he could call Arthurus, Catherina lunged forward, trying to cover his mouth with her hand, tears streaming as she begged him. He seized her wrists violently and shouted:
"How dare you, you—!"
The slap echoed through the room for several seconds before Catherina's weak, trembling voice broke out:
"Please… I'll do anything… have mercy… I'll kiss your feet… anything but this!"

"So now you beg?" he sneered. "Either I kill you, or you go down there!"
She whispered helplessly, "Then kill me… in both cases, I'll die…"
He swelled with triumphant cruelty "You wished for death so quickly! Isn't your Lord supposed to fill your heart with joy, even when you're weak?
(And with cold mockery) Unless strength is what truly matters?"

Catherina collapsed into tears, burying her face in her hands.
"I was on my way to learn my faith… I don't even know how to answer your strange questions—questions I never imagined in my life!"
He replied victoriously:
"Of course. You only repeat what they told you. You know nothing.

As for me—I won't sell my life to some idea living in my head, forcing me to interpret the world as it wants.
I'll spare you on one condition: you abandon this 'Father'

nonsense forever."
"I don't want your mercy, then!"

Johannes's face darkened. He bared his teeth and shouted:
"You still believe it, you insolent girl?!"
"And… and I'm ready to die for it too…"
"Very well, since you said so! Arthurus! Take her to the mine!"

Catherina buried her face in the mattress, shaking with terror. But Arthurus didn't come. Johannes shouted again:
"Arthurus! Arthurus! Where are you, you useless—?!"

Then he muttered, puzzled:
"Strange… he's never failed me in his life."
He shoved Catherina toward the door.
"Go out and see where he is!"
She curled up on the floor. "So he take me? No…!"

Minutes passed. Johannes's thoughts churned, while Catherina sobbed. Finally the door opened and Arthurus entered, eyes lowered.
"Forgive my delay, sir. Master Jacobus was here checking on your health."
"My father? Huh! Whatever. Take her to the mine—let her work like a dog there!"

Arthurus grabbed Catherina's arm to drag her away, then stopped.
"Sir… her fever is very high. She's shaking from the cold."
"And what is that to me?"

“The weather is freezing today—especially in the valley. Even Leader Vilmos ordered the slaves moved to the upper barn so they don’t all perish.”

“My uncle did that? Then it must be serious!”
“Yes. So if you want her to die from the cold, I’ll take her there.”
Johannes exhaled, tapping his fingers for a few seconds, then turned his face away.
“Fine. We’ll postpone the punishment. Take her out.”

Catherina staggered, struggling to keep up with Arthurus’s pace. Returning to the cell felt like a blessing from heaven. But the moment she entered the cellar, she heard the others protesting:
“Arthurus, look at us—”
“We’re freezing to death—”
“My feet are numb—”
“If we were animals, you’d have moved us already!”

Arthurus groaned, then herded them all upstairs into an empty room and ordered the jailer to guard them strictly.

Catherina sat alone in a larger corner, while the other five huddled together, welcoming Jorvoss back among them, clinging to each other for warmth.

She shivered and shivered, fever gnawing at her, but the days passed without mercy. She fought her illness alone, curled in her corner, her blue fingers tracing slow circles as though turning a rosary, whispering the hymns her soul longed for.

From her frozen place, she watched her companions laugh and joke, casting her into the ice of solitude. She realized with every fiber of her being that principles sometimes cost a person their life—but she believed the cost was worth it.

“Curse you all… because of you I’ll spend Christmas night like every dull night.
If only you’d frozen in the cellar—I’d be spared your miserable faces…”
That was the jailer muttering as he slammed the door. The “crickets” laughed and sang at him. Catherina sighed, remembering last Christmas—how innocent she had been, believing the world was built on boundless mercy and compassion.

She remembered how she used to dream, how she felt like the purest sister in the whole monastery. Now she wouldn’t dare enter it except in memory. She couldn’t even lift her eyes toward the statue of Christ. Even the warm sunbeam on her old bed had become one of her fading, unreachable dreams.

She exhaled, blowing on her toes, hoping they would move. Then the jailer burst in shouting: “You cursed face! Come here!”
The “crickets” glared at her. Catherina rose slowly, terrified, bracing for the postponed punishment. The jailer yelled at her to hurry, but she stumbled on her frozen toes and fell on her face.

To the sound of their mocking song, she crawled toward Johannes’s room on her knees, Arthurus dragging her by the arm. Her heart pounded, and her blue lips had found yet another

reason to tremble.

He shoved her into the room. She fell forward, landing on her face with eyes tightly shut, her lips moving in a frantic, silent prayer. Even in her terror, her body greedily drank in the room's warmth—a luxury she hadn't dared dream of.

Finally, she gathered the courage to lift her head. The room was empty. Exhaling a long, shuddering breath, she crawled toward the fireplace. She sat there for a long time, trying to convince herself she wasn't dreaming, gasping and writhing in pain as the blood began to circulate through her frozen fingers. At last, she collapsed onto a pile of warm blankets, surrendering her weary eyes to the blessing she had craved for days: sleep.

Hours passed like a heartbeat. Suddenly, from the depths of a heavy slumber, she felt a boot shove her from behind. She bolted upright, still swaying with exhaustion, only to meet his piercing gaze.
"A miserable Christmas to you," he said, a mocking smirk playing on his lips. "Did you enjoy my gift? My generosity?"

Catherina struggled to open her bloodshot eyes. "Sleep is the greatest gift I could have received on this wretched holiday..."

She traced a cross of gratitude over her chest, rubbing her eyes and smoothing her hair before blurting out, "But wait! How can you celebrate this day when you don't even believe in Christ?"
"Huh?" he scoffed. "What does Christ have to do with any of this?"

"The holiday is for celebrating His birth, His blessed coming into the world," she insisted. "We recite His commandments, remember His glorious Nativity, and sing the hymns of heaven."
He waved a dismissive hand. "To us, it’s just an excuse to drink blood and count the year’s spoils."

He paused, then burst into a jagged laugh. "Wait, it turns out God has a Wife, too? Hah! How? He is like no other, yet he has a wife and a son?"
"No," she said, her voice trembling with conviction. "Not a wife. Saint Maria was a virgin... the Holy Spirit came upon her, and she conceived without the touch of a man."
"Incredible! A new fairy tale," he sneered. "A woman conceives without a man, and then God claims the boy is His son.. and everyone believes Him."

"You fool!" she cried. "I told you, it was the Holy Spirit! Weren't you listening?"
He glared at her with sudden resentment, his expression darkening with insults of spiteful revenge. Catherina shrieked, "Don't start with your vile words! Just forget it, please!"
"Plee-ase... plee-ase!" he mimicked, his voice dripping with venom. He turned to her with pure malice. "You’ve been impudent with me. I’ll make you pay for that."

She placed one hand on his shoulder and the other on her chest, pleading, "Fine, it was I who insulted you. Take the price from me. Say what you want to Me, do what you want to Me—but do not blaspheme against the holy."

He turned away, shoving her aside. "Do you truly love this -*- that much? I feel like I’m talking to a child who can’t tell the difference between the dead and the sleeping!"

"What if I... what if I massage your feet?" she interrupted, her voice laced with desperation. "As an apology, so you can calm down and..."
"...And change the subject? No. Don't touch my feet."

Silence hung heavy between them for a few moments. Then, Johannes sat before the mirror, stretching his legs out. "Cut my hair instead. There’s a revelry tonight, and I want to look handsome. I need to be charming so that..."

"Cut your hair? I've never cut a man's hair before," she stammered. "But... I'll try."
He gave her a knowing smile. "Is this for the sake of the fireplace?"
She picked up the comb with a flicker of forced cheer. "I won't lie to you—it is."

It took over an hour of painstaking effort before the haircut was passable. He stood up, surveying himself.

"You are ugly and incompetent. But... it will do." She sighed heavily. "Does your tongue ache if you miss an opportunity to insult me?"
"Sometimes, yes," he admitted.
They exchanged a long, meaningful look before his tone softened ever so slightly. "Now, Kati, help me practice my dancing before

the party."

She shrank back, distressed. "I've never danced in my life! How can I help you practice?"
He reached out and snatched her hand with a wicked glint in his eyes. "No matter. I'll teach you, just like I've taught you everything else."
Her face flushed with shame. "You are a cursed teacher," she muttered.

He let out a sadistic laugh. They spent another hour dancing before he finally reached for the doorknob. "Since you were an obedient little dog, I'll be gracious and let you stay by the fire."

She listened to the lock click with bitter resentment, whispering to herself:"A gift, a haircut, a dance... It's so hard for him to admit his feelings, and so hard for me to endure that a murderous villain harbors such filthy emotions for me."

She looked around the room, her heart sinking. "Where was I last Christmas, and where am I now? Lord, have mercy!"

She sat on the floor by the hearth, mourning her luck. "Oh Lord, are You truly pleased with what is happening to me? Is this a punishment or a test? At least let me know the wisdom behind it, so that my heart may find faith."
The next morning, Johannes returned to his room, exhausted. He ordered Catherina to leave, but she dared to ask, "Can I take the blanket with me? It's so cold out there."

He yawned. "I'll give you a chance to beg for my favor."
Catherina bowed, kissing his hands and showering him with desperate praise to feed his ego. Finally, he relented as he drifted off to sleep.
Catherina took her "prize" and hurried back to Arthurus, her heart a tangled mess of humiliation and relief.She huddled in her corner, seeking warmth in her new blanket, ignoring the spiteful eyes of the cockroaches in the shadows.

It wasn't two days before Catherina was called back—this time to nurse Johannes. He was bedridden, not from physical illness, but from a crushing depression and a growing desire to sleep forever.
Catherina saw the depth of his despair; the spark in his eyes had died, and his mocking laughter had turned cold. His face was a void of hope, a sickness of the soul.

He held a knife in his hand, occasionally pressing the tip against his own throat before drawing back. Finally, he made his decision. He handed the blade to Catherina.
"When I fall asleep," he whispered, "drive this into my neck with all your strength."

Catherina's hand shook as she took the knife. "They won't know I was following your orders," she breathed. "They'll kill me!"
"Then kill yourself after me."
"But I don't want to die, Johannes!"

"I've decided for you," he snapped. "Your life has no meaning anyway. Look at me—I've reached the pinnacle, I have everything, and I've found nothing worth living for. Not a single

thing."
He pulled her closer. "Trust me; there is nothing to cry over. Let's go to our rest together, Kati."
"That is because you have never tried faith, Johannes. Faith gives you a purpose; it makes you understand why you draw breath!"
"Ah, still clinging to your old delusions..."

Before he could finish his sentence, the door flew open with a sharp burst. A thin, fortyish man stepped in—black hair, brown eyes, his face cruelly scarred and his skin creased like old parchment. Yet even through the ruin Cathrina could see it: the unmistakable echo of Johannes's features living in this stranger's bones, the same sharp line of jaw, the same tilt of brow.
In a voice surprisingly soft, the man called out:

"Johannes, my son… what are you doing?" He took one step closer. "How can a young man like you even think of suicide? You haven't truly lived yet."

Johannes dragged himself upright on the bed and let out a long, bitter breath.

"What exactly haven't I tried?" His tone was flat, exhausted. "Money. Power. Men. Women. Animals. Food. Wine. Every pleasure this world can vomit up—I've had it all. There's nothing left to wait for… except more suffering. Every day is the same as the one before."

"But you haven't—" The older man's voice caught for a moment. "You haven't tried fatherhood. You must try it. You are the last of the Vilmos bloodline."

Johannes gave a short, ugly laugh. "And why the hell should I drag

another soul into this empty, rotting life—just so he can grow up under Jonathas's heel? Better he never exists at all."

"Johannes!"

Catherina shrank back instinctively, pressing herself against the wall as father and son locked eyes in a stare that could have cut glass. After a long, dangerous silence, the man—Jacobus—spoke again, this time with iron certainty.

"Tomorrow you return to the robbery business." Johannes's face lit up despite himself; a flash of savage joy crossed it. "Finally!" he cried. "Almost a year I've been caged in here like an animal!"

Jacobus advanced, each step deliberate and heavy. "In exchange," he said, "you will have relations with one woman only. The woman who will become your wife. As for your girls—" His voice hardened. "They will be reassigned to service. You will forget they ever existed."

The light died on Johannes's face as quickly as it had come. His jaw clenched so tightly the muscles stood out in cords. "And why now?" he hissed. "I'd love to know what glorious crime I've committed." He turned his face to the wall, trying—and failing—to hide the fury trembling through him.

Jacobus crossed the room in three strides, plucked the knife cleanly from Catherina's numb fingers, then turned back to his son. "If this woman is not the one you intend to choose," he said quietly, dangerously, "then she leaves your room. Right now."

"Let her leave" Johannes spat, grinding his teeth, his entire frame trembling with a suppressed rage. Catherina looked at him one last time before turning away. She returned to her corner, her face ashen, her mind drifting in a hollow daze.

When the crickets began their rhythmic chirping in the shadows, she whispered to them with a painful bitterness:
"Stop your laughing. Let us enjoy this room while we can... we may well be sleeping in the valley tonight."

She broke into a jagged sob. The other captives exchanged uneasy glances before the women erupted into mocking laughter. Only Jorvoss stepped closer, his voice low. "What happened? Tell me."
When Catherina finished recounting the ordeal, a heavy silence fell over the group. They had all lived for the hope of leaving this prison, but now that the moment of truth had arrived, the reality felt more like a sentence than a release. Disappointment hung in the air like a fog until Jorvoss finally broke the stillness.
"Catherina... I apologize for everything I've done to you. Please, forgive me."

Shocked, Catherina stared at him, struggling to find her voice. "You... apologizing? I've never known a moment of kindness from you."
"Life forced me," he muttered. "Be generous. Don't seek revenge on me... alright?"
"Who said I would seek revenge? How could I even do it?" she asked, a sad smile touching her lips. "I don't even belong to myself."
"How humble you are," he remarked.

"And how pathetic you are!" Elisabetha shrieked from the shadows. "No matter what happens, never apologize!"
"The day is coming soon, Elisabetha, when you'll realize that

pride is a useless shield," Jorvoss countered.
She scoffed, "Look who's talking!"

The following day, Arthurus led Catherina down an unfamiliar path. Her trembling steps mirrored the dread in her heart; she was walking toward a destiny she could neither see nor control. They entered a new room where Johannes sat stiffly in a chair, his elbow propped on a table, radiating fury. His father, Jacobus, paced the floor with his hands clasped behind his back.

Upon seeing her, Jacobus approached. "Your name?"
"Catherina."
"And your family name?"
"It is... unknown."
"Unknown? Hmph." Jacobus paused, studying her. "Imagine that—my son chose *you* out of all the beauties available to be his wife. I cannot fathom the reason for such a strange choice, but that is not my concern."

Jacobus cast a look of utter disdain toward Johannes, who remained staring fixedly at the wall. Jacobus turned back to Catherina:
"Marriage is built on consent and trust; coercion serves no purpose here. So, I ask you: do you agree to be a faithful and chaste wife? To please your husband, raise your children, and sacrifice everything for this home?"

Johannes turned then, his voice cutting through the air with mocking irony. "As you can see, you are 'perfectly free' to vow your life to me... or head to the valley. There is no compulsion

here; you have total liberty!"
Jacobus smiled at the grim irony. "So, what is your decision?"

Catherina was a storm of internal conflict. She had paced her cell all night weighing this choice, yet the words felt stuck in her throat. Should she vow before God to serve an enemy of God for the rest of her days? Or should she choose death under the lash and a life huddled among human herds who had lost every ounce of dignity?

Finally, she forced her pale lips to speak the impossible words. "I so vow."
"Speak it," Jacobus commanded. "What do you vow?"
"I vow to be a good and obedient wife, and to raise my children with love and devotion."

Johannes turned his head, his eyes gleaming with a dark confidence. "And I vow to be an unrestrained husband, to do exactly as I please, and to punish you mercilessly should you fail in any part of the vow you just made me."

"Johannes!" Jacobus roared. "That is not what we agreed upon!"
"Heh. Despite my faults, I am an honest husband. I cannot lie and say otherwise."

Johannes erupted into laughter. Jacobus shook his head in frustration and headed for the door pointing "This is your room from now on. Fix your appearance and put on something decent. You are a Vilmos now. Respect your new name: Catherina Vilmos."

"What a wedding," she whispered dejectedly.
Johannes wore his usual smirk. "What wedding are you talking about? How long have you lived at my' now?"
"Seven months."

"Truly? I hadn't noticed."
He laughed lightly, but she looked him in the eye. "I, however, felt every single second of it."

"Hah! Know this: my treatment of you won't change. The truth is, I chose you out of pity. Nothing more. The pity of the strong for the weak."
Her tongue slipped, fueled by a spark of defiance. "It's no sin to admit that you love me."
Johannes faltered for a heartbeat, his silence lingering. "Don't count on that, you fool. When I find someone better, I'll move on without a second thought."

Catherina lowered her gaze. Johannes added, "Tonight, we attend a communal dinner. We shall drink a toast to our marriage with the others."
He swaggered out of the room, leaving Catherina to mourn what she had sold. She had sold her life to a man who mocked her pain and openly declared his intent to discard her. It was a choice that would either elevate her to the elite or cast her into the depths of ruin.

As the dinner hour approached, she composed herself and bathed. She looked in the mirror with a flicker of resentment, remembering her father-in-law's words: *"My son chose you out of*

all the beauties... I cannot fathom the reason."

She began to do what she hadn't done in months. She brushed her hair, smoothed her features, and donned a respectable gown. She found herself winking at her reflection, longing for the woman she used to be, when Johannes walked in.
"Are you rea—?"

He stopped mid-sentence, moving closer to inspect her. "It seems a man marries half a woman and half a dress. And to think you were wearing that ridiculous black rag all this time!"
"It was meant to hide my beauty," she replied sharply, "so I wouldn't fall into the hands of men like you."
"Really?" he mused. "Tell me more. It only increases the thrill of crushing you. Hahaha!"

As she shot him a piercing look, he added, "But you know, something is missing... ah, yes."
He stepped to the door and shouted, "Arthurus! Bring me the ladies' jewelry."
A minute later, Arthurus returned with a chest overflowing with precious gems. Catherina’s eyes wandered over the shimmering hoard, but the beauty was tainted; she knew every piece was the spoils of cruelty, torn from the bodies of others.

"So," Johannes said, "which one? I’ve never chosen for a woman before."
"Of course not; you spend your life dealing in pain.. This one looks fine."
He picked up a pearl earring, squinting at it. "This? It’s tiny! The

smallest thing in the box!"

She toyed with her fingers. "It seems right for my face... in my opinion."
"Fine," he said, handing it to her. "Try it on. Large or small, all I care about is that you look enchanting."

Catherina took it, whispering to herself, "At least Christ set an example with 'pearls of great price.' At least they won't realize that, to me, they symbolize the Kingdom of Heaven!"
Indeed, Catherina donned the pearl set, convincing herself it was the least sinful choice due to its modest size. She braced herself for Johannes's mockery, but he only remarked with a smirk, "It seems my own taste has improved as well!" He linked his arm with hers, pulling her forward. "Come, we shall be late."

There, the banquet table was crowded with the lords of the criminal underworld. For the first time, Catherina sat at the head of the table beside Johannes as his wife. All eyes were fixed upon her, scrutinizing the choice of the younger Vilmos.

Within minutes, Jacobus leaned toward Johannes and whispered, "Now that her hair and appearance are mended, it seems your taste isn't so poor after all—especially with those pearl earrings."

Johannes smiled with arrogant pride, glancing at Catherina. She, however, felt a sickening coil in her stomach, melting into the grim reality that she was now a prominent figure in a den of thieves. Her heart bled at the thought: the nun had become one of the matriarch of a den of vice.

Moments later, the Leader of the gang entered to take his place at the very head of the table. Everything suggested to Catherina that this was no mere band of mountain outlaws; it was a vast, disciplined organization.

The conversations around her spoke of operations spanning the length and breadth of the country. It felt less like a gathering of thieves and more like a summit of dark kings.

Soon, Catherina caught the attention of the terrifying Leader. He fixed her with a piercing, predatory gaze that raked over her from head to toe.
Catherina's eyes darted away as they met those savage orbs, set in the face of a man in his fifties. Gray hair and a silver beard invaded his features, but their whiteness did nothing to soften the malice written upon his dark, loathsome face.

The feast began. Servants scurried about the hall as the guests fell upon their food. Catherina found no choice but to lift her fork, just as she heard a man call out to Johannes: "What a waste! I had hoped you would marry my daughter."
Johannes let out a short, sharp laugh "The door is never closed for me!"

A lump formed in Catherina's throat. Her hand froze. Her heart wavered—was she a wife to him, or merely an obligatory partner?
When he spared her no attention, she exhaled sharply and thrust the fork into her mouth, almost snapping it between her teeth in frustration.

Johannes ate ravenously, engrossed in the talk of business, while Catherina forced down a few tasteless bites. The atmosphere repulsed her; the air was thick with tales of atrocities, spoken of with a total absence of humanity or conscience.
The vulgar sounds of their eating and their barbaric manners turned her stomach. She was, after all, sitting among the lowest of men.

Worse still, she noticed the Leader watching her pearl necklace, his gaze sharp and thorny whether he was speaking or silent. Anxiety gnawed at her, so she kept her eyes anchored to her plate until the end of the banquet, seeking only to escape his presence.

When the time for toasts arrived, Johannes stood among the men, clutching Catherina's hand. He called for a toast to their marriage, and the room erupted in cheers. A sob caught in Catherina's throat as she yearned for the sacred rites of a church wedding, calling out for purity from behind the heavy veils of her new life.

Yet, she held herself together, performing her role despite the condescending whispers of the women present. A feminine hiss reached her ears: "Like a piece of wood... what could he possibly see in her?"
Catherina pressed her fingers against her pearl ring, trying to vent the overflow of her disappointment. She felt scorched by the weight of the gown and the pearls upon her conscience. She was on the verge of breaking until Johannes suddenly pulled her into the wedding dance.

In the depths of his powerful eyes, she sensed her own weakness —and his smirk, which seemed utterly indifferent to the critics. In that moment, the internal court of her mind ruled that she must overcome her fragility to secure her place, before he was stolen from her—or before he discarded her himself.

Sensing the danger, she began to compare herself to those around her. Her own movements were stiff and restrained compared to the brazen women in the hall.
She searched for a single woman who carried herself with the dignity she once knew, but the place was a cacophony of limitlessly vulgar laughter. She felt herself dissolving in a sea of discomfort and shame.

It was the image of that terrifying face—the Leader's face—that haunted her as she walked with Johannes toward the main chamber the following day. She knew she was about to face him personally. She had barely escaped his gaze the night before; now he would speak to her face-to-face and pass judgment.
One word from him could end the marriage and cast her back into the abyss of slavery.
As soon as their eyes met, he asked in a commanding tone, "Your name?"
She curtsied slightly, her dress rustling. "Catherina, Uncle."
"Catherina what?"
"Catherina Vilmos."
"Not yet... I am asking for your father's name."
"It is unknown."

The Leader shrugged and extended his hand, whispering,

"Johannes!"
Without a second thought, Johannes moved to kiss his uncle's hand. The older man gripped the hair at Johannes's forehead with sharp nails, looking at Catherina as the gold bracelets on his forearm jingled with a metallic ring.

Then, the Leader released him and asked with chilling confidence: "What is it?"
Catherina swallowed hard, receiving the silent message. She replied in a hushed voice, "Pristine."

Pristine?" the Leader echoed. "Is that not the name of the Bishop of Marona Church?"
"It is."

His voice darkening into a reprimand "Do I have to drag it out of you? Tell me everything!"
Trembling and flustered, she stammered, "He is my father. I was raised in the convent under his care, he and my mother. I know nothing of the world beyond my prayers."

The Leader cut his eyes toward Johannes with a look of pure disgust. "Of all the women in this world, you chose a nun? The daughter of a Bishop? You utter simpleton."

Johannes pulled back, his brow furrowed as he tried to process the word. "And what, exactly, is a Bishop?"

The Leader's face transformed, and he erupted into a fit of laughter that shook his frame. "That is the most unexpectedly

idiotic answer I have ever heard in my life! You marry a nun and you don't even know what a Bishop is?"

He took a breath, his tone turning speculative. "I assume it has something to do with that 'Lord' of theirs..."

The Leader smiled with a predatory vanity "A Bishop, Johannes, is the man who presides over church gatherings. He mocks the masses to swindle them out of more money—pretending he can convince their supposed God to forgive them and keep them from being kicked out of Paradise, no matter how many sins they've piled up."

Catherina spoke up with cautious defiance, struggling to master her terror. "You mock Johannes with a definition like that; it blinds more than it illuminates."

He raised his shoulders and arched his eyebrows in a sneer. "Aha! Enlighten us then, Sister. Define your father's rank for us."
Catherina hesitated under his mockery, then sharpened her voice. "A Bishop is the shepherd who carries the staff of service. He teaches us the mysteries of the Church—baptism and repentance.
He listens to our confessions to free our consciences from the weight of sin through the love of the Savior. He urges us to give alms, for he who has mercy on the poor lends to the Lord."

Silence followed. Catherina was shocked that they had listened at all. The Leader then turned to Johannes with a mocking grin. "And what did you gather from that, Johannes? Give us *your*

definition now."

Johannes scratched his head vigorously, racing to connect the dots of what he had just heard.
"What I gathered? Hmm... alright. A Bishop is the leader of a church gang who, through rituals I don't understand, manages to convince people there is a King called 'The Lord.' People have to follow Him because He created them.."

He looked aside: "..and this King apparently likes people to be generous to the poor, so they give their money to the Church, while the whole thing is just nonsense born of the Bishop's own greed."

He turned sharply toward Catherina. "By that logic, you're the daughter of a gang leader too!"
The Leader chimed in with a note of dark admiration. "A prince married to a princess—all with the *full resentment* of God!"

Catherina went pale at the mocking comment. Johannes, looking puzzled, asked the Leader, "I didn't realize this 'Lord' I heard about by chance was so well-known to everyone."

The Leader shook his head. "You fool... haven't you noticed we use *His* name in our curses?"
Johannes recoiled in embarrassment. "What? Oh... right. It never occurred to me that it was a separate word, or that it had such a meaning."

Suppressing a laugh, the Leader looked at Catherina. "Is death in

the mines not easier than living under the wing of this infidel?"

His voice then turned into a cold, clear threat. "You still have a choice. But if you decide to become one of us, I will scrape the skin off your bones with saws if I hear a single word about your Christ again."

Catherina lowered her head, the horrific images of the mines flashing through her mind. Her soul whispered in agony, *"Father, I find no heavenly aid in a trial as wretched as this!"*
No. She knew she could not throw herself into forced labor, into the sound of the whips... that sound would become a searing flame on her skin night and day, without a shred of mercy. And what would become of her at night in those foul, rotting shacks? No!

She pressed her fist against her chest. *"If the Father is as merciful as they say, He would not wish for me to be tortured. If my mother knew, she would forgive me; she would not want this agony for me. If Christ were here, He would have pity..."*

She was jolted back to reality by the Leader's rasping voice. "Catherina, to become a 'Vilmos' means the Church is a past from which there is ***no*** return. To put it in your terms: you must renounce your past, ***deny*** your vows before us ***now***, and ***curse*** the very church that sheltered you!"

Catherina raised her head, her eyes frozen. Her lips moved. She didn't truly listen to what her tongue uttered, but she knew she had forsaken her faith when she saw the look of satisfaction on

the Leader’s face.
"She will do for now," he told Jacobus.

Catherina returned to her room, her vision blurred and her soul hollowed out. She collapsed onto the bed, unable to believe the magnitude of the sin she had just committed. She remembered the stories of the saints…

How had they managed to remain steadfast through every hardship?
How had they stood tall before tyrants, earning their place in history for centuries to come?

She whispered, grinding her teeth, "A cowardly failure like me will never know the answer to that. At least... it is a blessing that my parents will never know what became of me."

Chapter Three:

Farewell to the Past

Catherina tossed and turned in her bed, trying to gather the shattered fragments of her soul after the spiritual calamity that had struck her. She bit her lip until it bled, then gnawed at her fingers, writhing in the suffocating grip of an anxiety that bordered on madness.

The door swung open abruptly, breaking her trance. She jolted upright, eyes wide with alarm, as Johannes stood in the frame.
“Kati, come. We’re going for a ride.”
“A ride?” she stammered.
“And why shouldn't we?”
“No reason... of course, we’ll go.”

"*At least it’s a chance to distract my mind*", she whispered to her soul as she prepared to leave.

For the first time in months of long, sunless confinement, Catherina stepped out of that cursed house. She took tentative steps upon the dewy snow—strides of a freedom she had nearly forgotten—squinting against a glare that felt alien to her eyes. She turned back, seeing the structure for the first time from the outside, finally grasping the nature of the prison that had held her.

It was a massive two-story stone edifice perched precariously on the edge of a great mountain gorge. Around it, various houses,

stables, and huts were scattered across a wide expanse. Everywhere she looked, men of the gang moved about—some loitering and talking, others training, while some drove groups of slaves to their daily labors.

Before she could fully process her surroundings, Johannes hoisted her onto his bay horse. Panicked by the sudden height, she grabbed the horse's mane. The animal tossed its head violently, and she shrieked, losing her balance, only for Johannes to steady her. He laughed, a sound of genuine mocking surprise.
"What is wrong with you? Have you never ridden a horse before?"
"No!" she cried. "This is terrifying!"

He let out a sharp bark of laughter as he vaulted up behind her. The horse shifted under the added weight, and Catherina screamed again, curling into herself and burying her head in her arms. Johannes reached around her to seize the reins, forcing her chin up to meet his mocking gaze.
"Steady now. You won't fall while you're in my hands."

Catherina raised her flushed face, looking at him with a mix of shame and trepidation. He planted a swift kiss on her cheek and nudged the horse forward. Soon, the biting mountain air began to whip against their faces, playing with their hair as they moved.
The brief moment of beauty was strangled by a haunting memory: the day he had brutally forced her onto a horse, draped facedown like a carcass. She couldn't help but compare that agony to her current position—cradled between his arms like a respected wife out for a legitimate stroll with her husband. *And*

what a marriage it is, she thought bitterly.

She tried to find solace in the breathtaking scenery she had craved, her mind racing for a way to bury the bitterness and enjoy a fleeting moment of peace. Beside her, she noticed a rare gravity in his features. She broke the silence.

“It seems I hold the title of the *only woman* in the family.”
“No,” he replied casually. “Didn't you see my cousin? The one in the short brown dress?”

“Oh, that was your cousin... how stupid of me. I thought she was one of your uncle’s girls.”
“Both.”
“Pardon?”
“She is both: his daughter and his girl.”
Catherina gasped, pressing her hands to her mouth. “That... that is revolting!”
“What’s so revolting about it?” He looked at her with genuine confusion.

“How can he dare to do something so heinous?” she exclaimed, her voice thick with indignation.
He glanced at her with utter disdain. “And why not? He’s the one who raised her; who has a better right to her than him? I don’t see what’s so strange.”

Catherina was stunned into silence, the words dying in her throat. He followed up with a piercing question: “Is this something to do with that God you were just cursing in front of us?”

In a jarring flash of clarity, Catherina realized the vast, hollow void left behind when God is removed from human life. She swallowed hard, her voice low and hesitant.

“And do you all live like this? With no laws at all? Is everything permitted?”
“My uncle sets the laws here,” Johannes said firmly. “Just as your father does in his church. You should realize that our laws are the only ones that matter to you now.”

Catherina looked down in shame, her throat dry. “Since you’ve introduced me to the man in control, who is the woman in charge? I haven't seen his wife.”
He took a sharp breath. “My uncle doesn't believe in marriage.”
She blinked, startled. “He doesn't believe in marriage? But you just got married—and isn't he the one who makes the rules?”

“No, I said he doesn’t *believe* in it, not that he doesn't *allow* it. Personally, he prefers women to remain merely... tools.”
A deafening silence fell between them before Johannes added, “As for me, my father believes in marriage, and so he forced me into this, as you saw.”

She threw a side-long glance at him. “I don't think I’ve seen his wife. Your mother?”
“Yes. My mother was the only one he ever married. She vanished suddenly when I was small. I never saw him mourn her or ask after her. I’ve always believed my father killed her out of revenge —I used to see her with my uncle quite often.”

Johannes spoke with chilling calm, while Catherina burned with a mixture of rage and terror. Her eyes widened in horror, her hands trembling as she spoke in a whisper.
“I should have asked this from the start... what is marriage to you?”

Johannes laughed, a cruel, triumphant sound. “A late question indeed! To me, being married to you means you are my girl, the one who will bear my children. That’s it. And since there is a custom that you represent me to the world, I had to distinguish you from the others. But between us—which is how it will be most of the time—I am your master, and my boot is above your head.”

He paused to let the weight of his words sink in, then added, “And what did *you* think it was?”
“That I was... your other half,” she replied gloomily, her teeth clenched as she stared at the ground rushing beneath the horse’s hooves.
But instead of the expected lash of his mockery, she was met with a strange, heavy silence. He didn't answer. He didn't comment. There was only the rhythmic thud of hooves, which seemed to quicken as if he were riding toward a grim destination rather than a leisurely outing. Catherina snapped back to reality, looking ahead, and realized she had walked into a trap disguised as a stroll.

She clutched at her chest, her heart hammering in sync with the horse’s gallop. The terrifying realization hit her: the Leader's test hadn't ended with mere words. Becoming part of this family

wouldn't be so simple.

She thought she had surrendered, but in the face of imminent disaster, her hands scrambled for Johannes's chest, clutching his coat in a desperate plea. "No, please... is there not a shred of mercy in your heart? Put yourself in my place..."

Her voice trailed off as she realized her words were dissolving into the wind. She stared at his stony, unyielding face through a veil of tears. The moment shattered when he yanked the reins with brutal force. The horse reared, neighing loudly, and his command came down like the strike of a blade: "Get down! Stand by that tree!"

She dismounted with a face drained of all color. Before her lay her village—the meadows of her childhood that had now become a foreign land. She cast a bleeding look toward the horizon before retreating into the shadows of a tree, her head bowed in shame.
Johannes offered no farewell. Instead, he spurred his horse and galloped back the way he came, abandoning her to the winter chill and the snowflakes that began to settle upon the head of that "wilted flower."

The silence of winter was soon pierced by the laughter of a group of village women, shedding the exhaustion of the road with idle chatter. They were returning with balanced water jars, their weight forgotten in the heat of a pleasant conversation.

As they passed the tree, they drew near.
At first, they did not recognize her. But soon, one of them

shrieked, "Catherina! It’s Catherina!"
The air filled with jubilant cries and laughter as they swarmed around her.
"We hardly knew you in these clothes! You’re finally back!"
"How did you escape those bastards?"
"We can’t believe you’re still alive!"

They vied with one another to pull Catherina toward the village, each wanting to be the one to deliver her to the convent. But to their shock, Catherina resisted in silence. She recoiled back toward the shadow of the tree as if she feared the light, preferring the cold embrace of solitude.

They stood stunned, attempting to comfort her, to reach her, to reason with her. But every effort was met with a hollow wall of silence. Finally, some of them rushed ahead to bring news of the "miracle" to the convent, and soon, a long procession began to wind its way toward her.

Within minutes, the circle around her grew and darkened as the Sisters arrived one by one. Each expressed her joy in her own way; laughter mingled with sighs of relief. Catherina felt she might lose consciousness, until she heard a voice that made the hair on her neck stand up and her heart beat like a funeral drum.

The Mother Superior pushed through the crowd, darting like an arrow toward Catherina. She seized Catherina’s hands and pressed them against her tear-stained cheeks, her eyes searching Catherina’s with raw, honest emotion.

"Kati, my darling... the Lord has brought you back alive. Praise be to God that you are safe!"

The moment the word 'Lord' touched Catherina's ears, her eyes erupted in tears. Her lips trembled for a second before she wrenched her hands away with shocking violence, thrusting them behind her back against the tree. She averted her gaze like someone dodging a dagger thrust.

The Mother was horrified. She began to beg for a single word, trying every way to reach her. After many failed attempts, she elicited only a fragmented sentence: "I am not..."
"Not?!" the grieving Mother cried out. "Not what? Why won't you speak? At least tell me what prevents you from talking to your mother, who would do the impossible for you! They can strip you of everything, but they cannot take your mother's heart!"

Suddenly, a new group of churchmen arrived, led by her father, the Priest. He did not embrace her. Instead, he placed a heavy hand upon her head and began to recite incantations loudly, hoping to drive the demonic spirit from her soul.

He did not realize that what was swirling inside his daughter's head was something far beyond the reach of a few chanted words. For the first time, Catherina could not look at her father as the great man of faith she had once adored, or the commanding figure she was proud to call father.

Instead, her mind was flooded with the words of the Vilmoses

family—the voices of Jorvoss, Elisabetha, and the others. They swirled in her mind, memories soaked in the pain of isolation and the slow rot of their influence.

The words of blasphemy she had uttered that morning acted like liquid lead poured into her ears and veins. All she could hear was the echoing voice of doubt in her soul:
Those hymns, Father, did not save me from outrage, nor did they shield me from pain. I am no longer the girl who sees the world through the eye of a needle, dear Father.

The prayer was cut short by a voice shouting from the distance:"Villagers! Sisters! Bandits are raiding the church...
there are at least ten of them!"
Her father's face turned a deep, bruised crimson. He seized his daughter's hair, forcing her eyes up to meet his, shouting with frantic rage: "Was it a trick? Speak, Catherina! Speak!"

Catherina's pale lips finally moved to a whisper:
"And how did you think they let me go so easily in the first place?"
Her mother shrieked, grabbing Catherina's clothes and shaking her with heart-wrenching sobs. "Catherina, no... I don't believe it. You didn't conspire with them... tell me it's not true! Tell me! Tell me!"

The mother wailed, ignored the sound of thundering hooves as the gangsters surrounded the group from every side. The crowd recoiled in terror at the sight of the ruthless blades drawn before them. Only Catherina's parents remained, flanking their flesh and

blood.

One of the masked riders shouted, "Kati, let's go!"
Catherina did not hesitate to bolt toward Johannes, but her father's grip was like iron.
"What do you want, enemy of God?" he roared. "You took the money—do you want to take her too?!"

The mother clung to her as well, screaming with desperate courage, "You won't touch my daughter, you wretch! Get away from here, son of Devil!"

Johannes's response was cold and certain. "If you don't let her go, I'll take her with your severed hands still clutching her."
As the distant clamor of the King's soldiers drew near, Johannes shouted to his men:"Work your steel! Bring her to me unharmed from their hands!"

In a moment of frenzied desperation, Catherina bit her father's hand until he recoiled, releasing his grip. She began to fight her mother with every ounce of her strength, but the woman's hold was unyielding, fueled by a primal iron will.

Finally, the father grabbed her shoulder, hispering through gritted teeth, "Don't you understand yet? He is her lover!"
Catherina flinched as if struck. Her mother glared at her, eyes brimming with the searing agony of betrayal. "I cannot, Catherina... I cannot believe you have done this."

Catherina's lips trembled, desperate to fend off the looming beast

of shame. "No, he is my husband!"

The mother's fingers dug into Catherina's skin, shaking her violently as she shrieked, "Did I force you into the vow; so that you fleed with him?!
How... how did this demon possess your mind? There were a thousand respectable men... Why him, you mad?!"

The father tried to pull the clinging mother away, his eyes fixed on the threatening glint of Johannes's blade as it drew nearer. Catherina whispered, pleading as she struggled to free herself, "Let me go, Mom... I have suffered enough. I will die if any harm comes to you!"

It wasn't the words, but the haunting tone and the steel shimmering before them that finally spoke the truth to the mother's heart. She released her darling daughter, meeting her eyes one last time. "My beloved," she whispered, "may Christ be with you."
"Thank you," Catherina whispered back, her voice raspy with agony.

She bid them farewell with a gaze drowned in tears before Johannes seized her hand, hoisting her onto his horse in a blur of haste. He watched from the corner of his eye as his bandits skirmished with a few arriving soldiers.

Then, they vanished into a storm of dust, leaving behind a mother's scream that tore through the very heavens: "Catheriiiiiine!"
Catherina pressed her trembling hands to her ears until the

sound of birdsong returned to the foreground. Her tears flew with the wind, the sound of her soft sobbing reaching the ears of Johannes, who lowered his mask and remarked,
"To be honest, you handled yourself better than I expected. I didn't think you'd actually stay put under that tree until I returned!"

Receiving no answer, he pulled her closer with one arm. "You cannot leave *your other half* behind."
Johannes glanced at Catherina's eyes and found them swimming in tears. He fell silent, comparing the scorn of his uncle and father that morning to the condemnation of her parents now, and the judgment of everyone at the banquet last night. He knitted his brows, her mother's contemptuous words ringing in his ears.

*Does that b*h not see how strong I am?* he hissed to himself, grinding his teeth. *She is the broken one, yet she dares mock me and try to turn Kati against me! I will prove to Katy that I am a worthy partner; I'll make her cast her mother's words to the wind.*

He raced the wind toward the house, seething. As they entered the main hall, his men followed, spreading looted gold across a table set before the Leader. "This is what those bastards hid in the church," one of them boasted. "We turned the place upside down in record time!"

Johannes took his seat at the Leader's right hand and sat Catherina beside him. He felt a gnawing anxiety; his wife's strange expression and his own intuition were sounding an alarm.

The Leader, meanwhile, began sifting through the gold with a cynical air. "The gold of the poor... yet shaped into crosses. I wonder, how does this benefit the poor in such a form?"

He turned to Catherina, whose face was flushed with suppressed emotion, and handed her one of the crosses with a smile. "Take this. Hang it in your room as a memento."
"No. I want no crosses."
Catherina's voice was sharp, despite the tremor in her throat.

The Leader tossed the cross aside and scanned the loot until he picked up a large, radiant pearl necklace. "What about this, my little daughter-in-law? Pearls suit you."

Shock registered on Johannes's face as Catherina stood, took the necklace, and fastened it around her neck in front of everyone. She moved with a haunting grace, despite the visible traces of her weeping.
"What do you think? Does it suit me?"

The men erupted in approval, save for one young man who remained silent. The tension tightened when Julia, the Leader's daughter, approached Catherina with a swaying gait. "Let me style your hair, pretty one. I'll make it look perfect—look, with this sparkling pin!"

Julia snatched a golden pin from before her father, who seemed lost in thought as he stared at Catherina. She showed her how it would adorn her hair, and Catherina was about to follow her when Johannes suddenly gripped her arm. His tone was dry and brittle.

"Your hair is fine as it is. There is no need for styling."

Julia stepped in quickly, resting her hand playfully on Johannes's chest. "Are you jealous, cousin? I've seen her with you for months —where did this bridegroom's jealousy come from all of a sudden? Hmm?"

Johannes shoved her away threateningly.
"I have told you a thousand times not to come near me. And now, I tell you: stay away from my wife. Do you hear me?"

He turned his command to Catherina. "Change your clothes and come to my room."
"Yes."

He stormed out, his rage palpable. Catherina followed shortly after, filled with trepidation. As she closed the door, she overheard Julia saying to her father, "It seems today is not the day."
The Leader replied with a boastful air, "I... have no need for trickery like you do."

Catherina glanced back at them from behind the door, her mind a blank slate of exhaustion. She hurried to change and went straight to Johannes's room. When she entered and shut the door, her nerves tightened at the sight of him pacing the room, a whirlwind of restless fury.

He saw her, and with a sudden, forceful movement, dragged her toward the open window. His breath came in ragged gasps as he

pointed a trembling finger toward the vast expanse of the sky. "Who is up there?" he demanded.

Catherina recoiled, her senses reeling. "No one..." she whispered, her voice barely audible.

He shook her violently, his desperation boiling over. "Catherina! Have I ever silenced you for speaking of God?"

Bewildered, she stared at him, unable to grasp the frantic shift in his soul. "Answer me!" he roared.
No," she breathed.

is eyes were searing now, dark pools of inner conflict. "Have I ever commanded you to blaspheme?"
No."
Did I ever make your marriage to me conditional upon changing your faith?"
No."
Then what," he shouted, "do you conclude from all this?"

Catherina's confusion sharpened into a painful tension. She stammered, then finally drew a sharp breath, forcing the words out in a rush: "I think you simply amuse yourself by mocking my story. You think I am a fool—that is all I know! I don't understand what you want from me now!"

A flicker of hesitation crossed Johannes's eyes, cutting through his rage. He took a long, stabilizing breath. "I... very well. To be honest, my mockery has ultimately turned against me."

He averted his gaze. Catherina stared at him, her heart still hammering against her ribs, trembling in the wake of his outburst. "What do you mean by that?" she asked tentatively.

Johannes squared his shoulders and turned back to meet her eyes. "First, answer me: Do you love me?"
"And do *you* love me?" she shot back, her voice laced with indignation.
"Do I truly need to say it? Then listen: I *love* you. And the very reason I love you is because..." He exhaled sharply, pausing for a heartbeat before leaning in to whisper, "...because you are the ***only*** *one* here who ***believes in God***."

Catherina stood paralyzed, struck by a bolt of pure shock. The very thing she feared was her greatest flaw in his eyes—the belief she thought he merely tolerated—was the very thing that drew him to her.

Sensing her upheaval, Johannes pulled her into a sudden embrace, hiding his face to avoid the vulnerability of their meeting eyes. "I have a secret," he murmured against her. "Will you keep it with me?"
A small, hesitant smile touched her lips. "Of course. Tell me, I'm listening."

He froze for a moment, gathering his resolve, then moved cautiously to shut the window against the world. Tucked beneath the heavy shroud of the bedcovers, his mood finally began to settle into a somber calm.

"The truth is," he whispered, "there is *no* master in this family *but* my uncle, Jonathas. For as long as I have known the world, I have lived in *his* cage, a creature of his whims. He uses me and hurts me; he profits from me and rewards me.
Sometimes, he simply sets me aside to drink and gamble until he decides to move me again—just as he did a few days ago."

He paused, the weight of his agony evident in his voice. "Naturally, there is no escape. He has eyes *everywhere*. And to be honest, I have no stomach for the life of the poor; here, the pleasures of life come easily. So... I am trapped here, in body and in lust, even if my mind holds a different opinion."

He stared into the darkness. "Since I was a child, whenever he hurt me and I found no protector, I looked for someone stronger than him. For a long time, I was certain no such power existed. I thought he was immortal."

His voice grew cold and analytical. "But now that my mind has matured, I see the points where he is defeated—crushed just as the lowliest animal is crushed."

"What do you mean?" she asked, her brow furrowing.
"I mean: Was he not once mere 'unclean water'? Was he not born of a woman? Was he not a helpless babe? Is he not forced to eat to survive? Is he not humbled by the basic needs of the body? Must he not sleep? Is he not eventually conquered by sickness and death?"

He turned to her, his eyes bright with a strange logic. "These aren't just weaknesses. If you connect these dots and look from a distance, the truth emerges: a Power far greater than him controlled him before he even entered this life, guided him through it, and will eventually end him as rot in the soil. Despite all his tyranny, he cannot deny that one day his eyes will dissolve —either through the putrefaction of the grave or the flames of the pyre."

He fell silent, drinking in her stunned expression. "So, I was stunned when I heard you speak of God. I realized it wasn't just a stray thought of my own, but something many had pondered before me.And there you were, ready to die for it."

His voice took on a sharper edge of disappointment. "That is why my mockery turned on me. Because you grew weak... so weak that you were ready to renounce your faith today before you even heard a real threat."

Catherina flushed with shame. "The truth is, I didn't say those things as myself. I... I said them imagining it was *you* speaking, and I was simply ignoring it, as I always do."

A fleeting smile passed between them. Catherina's face brightened. "Then we can say it, Johannes... you *believe* in God!"
Johannes swallowed hard, weighing his words with solemn precision.

"I *believe* in the *Force* that governs the universe," he said. "But I

am struggling to learn how to connect with it. I believe that whoever connects with that *Power* gains their protection... and becomes the strongest of all."

"But what is the way?" Johannes mused, his voice laced with a newfound hunger for understanding. "At the very least, I want to know why this Power has shackled me to the chain of existence. I do not believe it was a whim of creation; I look at other creatures, and I see no such aimlessness."
"That is wonderful, my dear! How did you come to that conclusion?"

The word *'dear'* did not escape Johannes's notice. A faint, eased smile touched his lips; the jagged edges of his nerves finally began to smooth.
"Consider the calf," he began. "Its death at the jaws of the wolf is no mere sport; it is the very means of the wolf's survival. To the cow, the loss of her offspring is a **nightmare**, yet the wolf sees only the **virtue** of feeding his young. It is a simple truth: a single event can be **a grace and a calamity** all at once."

Catherina shivered. "Never in my life would it have occurred to me to look at the world so."
"You feel that the world of the cattle is distinct from the world of the wolves," Johannes added, pride swelling in his chest at her approval, "even though we see both unfolding within a single realm. And so, yes... this intricate design suggests to me that I am part of it, somehow."

Catherina smoothed her hair, a mischievous glint touching her

eyes. "You mean, like Catherina of the peasant-world? Hunted by a wolf from the mountain-world? Her mother left grieving, while the wolf counts her as his beloved prize?"

Johannes went silent for a heartbeat before erupting into a sudden, genuine laugh. "I didn't mean it like that! I truly didn't... So, I am the wolf then? Ha! How perfectly you fit the pieces together."

"But do you see the irony?" she asked, her voice softening. "**Both** the peasant and the criminal are **humans**. The calf and the wolf are different species entirely, but we... we are the ***same*** creature, yet we represent different worlds."

She sighed, a heavy sadness clouding her face. "That was my feeling this morning. When I passed from my parents' hands into yours, I felt as though I were crossing into a foreign land. Different laws, different masters... even the clothes are not the same."

"Let us return to the beginning," Johannes whispered, his expression hardening. "Add this to your knowledge: this is the world of *Jonathas*."
He exhaled a breath of pure agony and placed his hand on her hair, his gaze turning deadly serious. "You do not understand. Let me tell you how this ends: my uncle intends to lie with you. That is why Julia was leading you away, you naive girl."

Catherina's eyes narrowed in horror.
"This is why I refused to marry," Johannes hissed. "I knew our privacy would vanish the moment his eyes fell upon you. But had

I not married you, you would have been forced into his direct service anyway, and I would have lost you entirely."

"But your father!" she stammered, shocked. "He was the one who insisted on the marriage."
"A charade," Johannes spat. "It was my uncle's decree, not his. Realizing that I am a prisoner in my uncle's claws—and that my father is merely a puppet by his own admission—is why I have come to loathe this life." His voice cracked. "I refuse to be a puppet in his hands as well."

He seized her hands, his grip desperate. "Do not make yourself beautiful for him. Do not smile. He is a monster... he is the one who killed my mother, and now he enslaves both my father and me."

As Catherina reeled, wondering which version of her mother-in-law's death was the truth, Johannes's voice rose with a sharp, macabre edge. "What more do you need? He killed his own father and devoured him! Every time a child is born to him, he roasts them alive and eats them..."

Catherina's eyes darted in terror; she clapped a hand over her mouth to suppress the rising bile. Johannes left her to her silence for a moment before snapping:
"What you did on your first day... it defied everything I expected! Why did you wear that necklace? Why did you try to draw every eye in the room? That isn't you. You showed me the meaning of modesty; for months, you couldn't even shed the crimson of your blushes. Why change now?"

"I... I..."
The tears choked her. She rubbed the fabric of the bedsheets between her fingers, trembling with shame. "I thought... if I was going to Hell anyway, this was my only chance to enjoy life. And so…"

"You fool!" Johannes growled. "You are a woman. The moment you think men are admiring you, know that in that very instant, they are calculating how to humiliate and possess you."

She glanced at him with a flicker of disdain, lowering her head.
"I know," he replied, shamed by his own deeds. "But now... I am a 'friendly wolf'."
She exhaled, turning her face away. "Friendly only in this strange hour."
"No," he insisted, grasping her hands again. "Forget the past. I will change, I promise! Haven't you felt it? I have become your other half." He stroked her hair, his voice ringing with a rare honesty.
"Solitude was killing me. I couldn't even speak to my father, knowing he would carry my words back to Jonathas. I wanted to trust you... I wanted you to be my friend. Someone who has nothing to do with Jonathas. Someone I can speak to with freedom."

The grief in his voice moved her. She looked up, meeting his eyes.
"If I am to be honest, the feeling is mutual. Loneliness is what broke my faith and made me falter."
She smiled through the gloom. "But now, knowing you are with me—that you believe in a Sovereign God as I do—it gives me warmth. It gives me the courage and safety I've been missing."

Johannes smiled back, but a sudden gloom reclaimed him. His words became clipped, hesitant. "I am sorry... if I cannot shield you from him tomorrow.. I saw him staring at you. Be strong. Just... go along with his whims. And endure."

Catherina would need far more than words to endure the night that followed. A man possessed by the megalomania of Jonathas knew no bounds when he held absolute power over soul and flesh.

Unexpectedly, the "monster" Johannes had once been in her eyes transformed. He was no longer the apex predator; he was a fellow inmate, sharing a miserable cell, groaning under the weight of the same tyrant. It was a surreal revelation.

Back in the jail, everyone lived under the assumption that the arrogant Johannes was the head of the hierarchy, a man to be flattered and feared. Now, standing beside him, she saw he was a slave who didn't even own himself.

Does Jonathas suffer the same? the thought nagged at her.
She sat in Johannes's room now, as he tried to comfort her after her ordeal. Catherina had not uttered a single word since her return; Jonathas' cruelty had been many times worse than anything she had known. Yet, she did not weep as much as before. This time, she had a chest to lean on—the very same chest she had once fought to flee.

After a long silence, she spoke with a heavy, contemplative tone.

"Yesterday in the village, I saw a sister from the convent. I had despised her once, when she came to us seeking repentance after a dark past. I shrank from her, believing she was unworthy of God's mercy... and now, I see I have traded places with her. I have become worth even less. Who knows how long I must pay the price for doubting the Lord..."

At that moment, a sharp knock echoed at the door. Upon Johannes's command, Jorvoss entered and knelt.
"The Master has ordered me to take over your service, replacing Arthurus," he announced.
"You?" Johannes frowned. "And what has become of Arthurus?"
"In the 'Box of Thorns,' I believe," Jorvoss replied coldly. "He saw fit to anger the Leader."

The atmosphere in the room turned brittle. Johannes's head sagged, while Catherina let out a sharp gasp of protest.
"No! Such injustice! No matter what he did, he doesn't deserve —"
"Kati!" Johannes roared, cutting her off. "Don't you dare utter those words! Have you lost your mind?"

Catherina bit her lip, forcing back the torrent of indignation. She exhaled slowly, looking away; suddenly, the weight of her own misfortune felt lighter against the backdrop of such casual cruelty.

Johannes, meanwhile, turned his attention to Jorvorss, barking out service instructions. The servant remained perfectly still, his eyes fixed submissively on Johannes's boots. Finally, with a low bow, Jorvorss retreated.

"That is his way," Johannes whispered to Catherina, his voice haunted. "He destroys anyone I find a connection with, using any excuse he can conjure." He let out a weary sigh. "Today he decided to prune the 'tree' of servants. He has appointed a maid for you as well."
"Truly? His whims are impossible to predict," she murmured.

A heavy silence settled between them. Catherina watched him for a long moment, a strange, piercing look in her eyes. "Johannes," she began, her voice tentative, "I must tell you something I noticed tonight. I don't know if it will shock you..."

She trailed off. Johannes straightened his posture, his features bracing for a blow. "What is it?"
She moistened her parched lips, her voice trembling with doubt. "I don't know if you've realized.. that Jonathas is.. he is your father. Your father, Johannes, not your uncle!"

Johannes surged to his feet, recoiling as if stung. "What nonsense is this, Kati?!"
"Wait! Think—" she urged, pointing toward the looking glass. "Think of how often you saw him with your mother. Look at the resemblance! It is so striking that now, for fleeting moments, you looked like a younger ghost of him."

Johannes's eyes widened, the blood draining from his face.
"By contrast," Catherina pressed on, "you look nothing like Jacobus. Jacobus has a round face; yours is long, like Jonathas'. And beyond the physical, the way Jonathas speaks of his bond

with you... it hints at a deeper claim."
Johannes folded his arms tightly across his chest, a defensive scowl deepening. "And where did you conjure this from?"
"Didn't you hear him? He told me, 'You bear *my* name.' He called me '*my* daughter-in-law'!"

Johannes waved his hand dismissively, though his agitation was palpable. "Familiarities! He uses them because he is my uncle—he is *like* a father to me."

Seeing the storm brewing in his expression, Catherina retreated. "Perhaps," she said, averting her gaze. "But the mere shadow of a doubt is living proof of *why* chaste marriage exists. See how lineages *blur* and the truth is *lost* when the laws of God are forsaken."

Johannes remained motionless, his face flushed a deep, angry red. He walked slowly toward the mirror, staring into his own eyes for several long minutes. He clutched his head as if trying to crush the thought within it. "I can't believe it..." he hissed. "I look like him... hauntingly so. No, it *cannot* be. Is that *devil* Jonathas truly *my* father? I shall go mad..."

His mood plummeted into a dark, volatile valley. Catherina rose, sensing she should leave before his temper turned on her. Just then, Jorvorss arrived with dinner. The moment the door creaked open, Johannes snarled, "Get it away from me, you son of a b—! You bring me *this*? Do I look like I have an appetite?"
"Johannes, please, calm down," Catherina whispered.
"Leave me be!" he shouted. "Go! Go to your room!"

Catherina retreated, a sharp sting of regret in her heart for having spoken. As she entered her chamber, she found a woman setting the table. She closed the door and sat down, offering a small, weary kindness: "Thank you."
She looked up, only to find a familiar, sullen face—a face she had once known with bitter intensity. The woman's voice was as harsh as ever.
"Don't look at me like that, you little—" Elisabetha bit her tongue, turning her face away. "Whatever. Enjoy your meal."

Elisabetha snatched up a bottle and stood stiffly by Catherina's side to perform the ritual of service. Catherina took the bottle from her hands.
"Don't trouble yourself; I can pour for myself. Why don't you sit and eat with me?"
"I'm leaving then," Elisabetha snapped, bolting for the door as if escaping a ghost.

Catherina smiled faintly to herself as she ate. *This is why one should never make enemies,* she thought. Before she could finish, a knock sounded. Elisabetha led Jorvoss in, who approached with a formal air.
"The Master wishes to check on you," Jorvors said loudly. "He asks if all is well?"
"Yes," Catherina replied, puzzled. "Everything is fine."

Once he was certain Elisabetha had retreated a safe distance, Jorvoss leaned in and whispered, "The Master said *nothing*. It is only I who am *starving*!"
Catherina chuckled, handing him a loaf of bread. "I told myself:

this isn't like him at all!"

She watched in silent amusement as Jorvoss tore the bread, hiding pieces in his mouth and his pockets. She handed him a piece of meat and some cheese. "Don't they feed you well now?"
"A single loaf after a day of back-breaking toil," he muttered with his mouth full.

She sighed. "It seems Johannes was a blessing by comparison."
Jorvoss quickly drained the rest of the juice from her cup. "I must go; Elisabetha is not to be trusted." He stood by the door and shouted pretending: "Yes, at once!" He exited, leaving Catherina laughing softly.

Elisabetha is offered a feast and refuses, she thought, *while the other fakes an errand for a few crumbs and drinks from my cup without a second thought. Truly, it takes all kinds.*

A few days later, Catherina was in her room, whispering prayers in her forced seclusion. Elisabetha entered, carrying a bundle of black cloth. Catherina stood abruptly, her heart leaping into her throat. She wanted to feel joy, but a cold intuition warned her to be wary.

Her hands shook as she touched the habit of a nun. Tears pooled in her eyes. "Why have you brought this?" she asked, her voice thick.
"How should I know?" Elisabetha replied coldly. "They told me to give it to you to wear."

Catherina panicked, remembering Jonathas' earlier threats of the "saws." She ran to find Johannes, desperate for clarity before making a fatal mistake. When he saw her, he looked merely annoyed.
"Haven't you put it on yet? I thought you'd be in it the second you saw it!"
"I feared it was a trap..."
"You are the very *trap* here, you simple girl," Johannes said with a tired sigh. "Hurry now, put it on and meet us outside."

Catherina failed to grasp the riddle of his words—*'You are the very trap'*—but she wasted no time. She stood before the looking glass, drinking in her own reflection. The loose, heavy folds of the habit, the wooden cross, the headpiece, and the familiar weight of the rosary beads.. it was a sight she had yearned for so desperately that she leaned forward and pressed a kiss against her own image in the mirror.

She hurried outside to find Johannes waiting by his horse, deep in hushed conversation with two of his men. After a moment, he approached to hoist her onto the saddle. To his utter bewilderment, she recoiled, darting out of his reach.

Johannes's expression flickered through a dozen shades of confusion and annoyance until she suddenly burst into laughter.

"You should have seen your face!" she teased, stepping closer.
He forced a tight smile, muttering under his breath, "Damn it. I knew that dress was cursed."
She hid a grin behind her hand. "Then why did you make me wear it?"

"Mount up and I'll tell you on the road."
"You want to hold me in your arms while I am wearing *this*?" she asked, her voice rising in feigned scandal.

Johannes scratched his head, genuinely stumped. "What is the problem?"
She gestured wildly at her attire. "Johannes! A nun is *celibate*! She does *not* even touch men!"
He rolled his eyes and extended his hand anyway. " My wish is to touch every nun..."
"And the best part," she cut him off sharply, "is that you never will!"

He rubbed his chin. "Regardless, the cloth doesn't change the fact that you are my wife."
"Perhaps not to you, but everyone else will *convict* me with their eyes. They will see me as a *fraud!* "

A look of realization finally dawned on Johannes. One of his men clapped him on the shoulder, masking a smirk. "She can ride the carriage, and you drive it."

They set off under the bleeding light of the sunset. Catherina sat huddled in the carriage, her fingers white as she gripped her rosary. Her heart felt leaden; she knew she was committing a fresh sin, using the sacred garments of her faith to facilitate a theft. She gritted her teeth, watching the road go by, imagining the shattered faces of her parents and friends if they ever discovered this sacrilege. She sighed, a cold acceptance settling over her: *This is my family now, and I had to endure their burden.*

The plan unfolded with chilling precision. Catherina approached the warehouse guard, using the polished, pious tone of a nun—a role she knew by heart. She spun a tale of a broken carriage and the falling darkness, her voice trembling with a weeping edge. The guard, moved by her apparent distress, had no idea she was truly weeping for the state of her soul.

While he worked on the "repair," Catherina grew frantic. The signal had not appeared. To stall him, she stood over him, showering him with blessings and impromptu sermons.

The guard eventually managed to escape her pious ramblings, terrified his absence would be noticed. The moment he vanished, the sound of galloping horses reached her. She let out a breath of relief, thanking God—only to be struck by the sickening realization that God would never bless what they had done.

The men moved like shadows, tossing crates into the carriage. Catherina scrambled inside as they tore away, the night air filled with their crude laughter and jests. As they boasted of their success, Catherina prayed the guard would think the theft a mere coincidence and not her treachery. But in her heart, she wondered: *where did all those blessings I spoke go?*

In the months that followed, the Leader played his new card—the "Nun"—in countless robberies. He claimed his own name didn't come for free, and Catherina was forced into the fray, sometimes as bait, sometimes as a thief.
It was a grueling existence, but Johannes’s constant presence

beside her acted as a shield against the crushing weight of her own shame.
The Leader, ever the strategist, knew exactly how to balance the risks of his new pawn.

One evening, Catherina returned from a mission and entered Johannes's room. He was eating dinner, but he paused the moment he saw her. "Your pregnancy is beginning to show," he remarked.
"Indeed," she said, leaning heavily against the table. "Walking is becoming a chore."

Jorvoss entered with a fresh bottle of wine. Catherina picked up a loaf of bread and asked the same weary question she asked every night: "May I give it to him by hand?"
Johannes smiled with forced patience. "For the thousandth time: No! You should thank me that I even allow you to feed him at all."

Catherina dropped the loaf onto the floor. Jorvoss immediately dropped to his knees, eating it with his mouth like a dog. Catherina watched him, then turned her gaze to Johannes.
"Do you know that He—the Sovereign Lord—will never listen to you as long as you insist on treating a human being like this?"

Johannes squinted over his glass. "Did He speak to you on my behalf?"
"He speaks to all of us!" she said, her voice rising with excitement. "And I will prove it to you."
Johannes took a leisurely sip of his wine. "Prove it then."
"Why don't you ride a cow?"

He looked at her with pure disdain. "You're going to prove God to me with a *cow*?"
"Answer me first!"
He leaned back, swirling his wine. "Hmm... I don't know, honestly. If you asked Jonathas, he'd have an answer, but I am no farmer."

Catherina blinked in surprise. "What does Jonathas have to do with farming?"
"He was a peasant in his youth, before he decided to become a thief."
She clapped her hands together. "No! Impossible!"
"It's the truth."

She smothered a laugh with her hands. "I cannot imagine *him* as a *farmer*... it's *too* ridiculous!"

"He felt his father was turning him into an *ox*," Johannes said, playing with his glass. "That is why he was so angry."

Catherina erupted into laughter. The disaster was that even Jorvoss, despite his terror, failed to suppress a snicker. Johannes, ever prone to violence, immediately delivered a series of kicks to the poor man, cursing him until he fled the room. When the door slammed shut, Catherina regained her composure.

"Back to our subject," she said. "We don't ride cows because their bodies are *not* built for it; they are built for *milk*. Conversely, why do we not milk a mare, even though she nurses her young?"

Johannes signaled for her to pour his wine in Jorvoss' stead. "That I can answer. Her milk is scant, and she... well, she refuses to be

milked."
"Exactly. Because her body is *perfect* for the saddle."
Johannes raised his glass dismissively. "What does the nature of beasts have to *do* with speaking to the *Sovereign Lord*?"

"This *is* the speech of the Lord," she insisted.
He rubbed his hair mockingly. "Has the wine hit me this quickly?"
She laughed softly. "By creating the cow in such a way, God *is* telling us to use her for milk. By creating the horse so, He *tells* us to ride. A man can ignore God's words and try to ride a cow or live on mare's milk, but he will soon realize he is in error."

"Ah... I see now," Johannes said, his tone shifting. "You are saying that Creation itself is a language. Symbols of what He wants. We could say God addresses the mind through *action* rather than words.. Am I following you?"
"Precisely!"

"Fine... but what does any of this have to do with the loaf of bread?"
Catherina put her hands on her hips. "Why does a dog eat with its mouth?"
Johannes began to laugh, then went silent, a knowing smile playing on his lips as if to say, *I have understood what I did not wish to understand.*

"You see my point," Catherina concluded. "When you force a human being—endowed with hands—to eat like a beast, you are *defying* the order of God and *corrupting* His creation. And so... He will *not* listen to you. At the very least, *not* while you do that."

Johannes looked away into the distance. After a heavy, hollow silence, he spoke.
"Sometimes I wonder... if God truly did speak to me, if He gave me a direct command, would I even listen? Would I obey? If He told me, 'No—do not drink,' would I stop? Even though the drink is the thing I truly enjoy?"

"That is the very essence of worship, Johannes!" she cried. "To *do* what He commands and *turn away* from what He forbids."
He averted his eyes, shaking his head in dismissal. "That is too difficult. I want to be *stronger*, not more humiliated."

Catherina sighed, falling silent for a long moment before she looked up at him with a clever glint in her eyes. "Should I wait until tomorrow to ask you about the loaf of bread? To see the result of this conversation?"
"Tomorrow I shall tell you: do not feed him at all, for he has earned my wrath!"

She exhaled sharply, leaning her head back, exhausted by his stubbornness. He let out a spiteful laugh.
"Who forces you to fight their battles anyway? As long as you are well, leave the misery to those it belongs to!"

"Weren't you the one who said Jonathas tormented you as a child, and you found no one strong enough to protect you?"
"And he still does."

"Then what stops you from being that 'strong one' for others? Why not lighten their burdens?"

"Nothing stops me," he said coolly. "But when I crush others, when I take my revenge without consequence, I feel the rush of power! If I start to care for them, I'll become like them. I won't be strong at all."

She grimaced with pure loathing. "You hurt others just to feel a 'rush'?"
He raised his glass, grinning at her. "Exactly. I steal their happiness to *add* it to my own."
Catherina stood up, fueled by anger and bitter disappointment. "Then I cannot blame Jonathas. If you were in his place, you would do exactly as he does. Goodnight."

She slammed the outer door behind her and walked with her head down, lost in thought. She had only taken a few steps before she nearly collided with someone. She recoiled, looking up to see the same eyes as Johannes's, but filled with a terrifying, absolute narcissism. She steadied herself before the Leader.
"Excuse me, sir. I didn't notice you were there."

The Leader's features shifted, softening into a mask of false gentleness. "Do you know? I don't believe our meeting is a coincidence. A question about God has been weighing on my mind, and my heart thirsts for an answer to pluck it from its darkness."
Catherina stammered, realizing she was in a trap. If she answered him, it might be a snare; if she refused, she might lose the chance to turn a man whose guidance could save dozens.
Ultimately, her intuition told her he was a liar.
"Forgive me, sir, but I no longer believe in God, as you well know."

"I know," he chuckled darkly. "But you were a nun. You can remember, and perhaps quench my thirst."
"I don't know if I can recall something from a past that no longer concerns me."

Jonathas laughed with pure malice. He reached out, his fingers grazing her cheek as he narrowed his eyes. "This mask you wear... don't you feel its weight heavy upon your heart? Your eyes still search a heaven that *no longer* sees you, and a God who *no longer* cares to watch over you."

He extended a hand like a claw, using the tip of a nail to lift the pearl necklace from her throat, playing with it mockingly. "Let us see when you will finally be free from the 'pearls of the Kingdom'."
Catherina was stunned. He knew her secret symbols; he saw right through her. She swallowed hard. "Will you give me your word of safety if I ask you just one question?"

Jonathas made a clicking sound with his tongue, basking in his own power. "I give it."
"It seems from your words that you have had a *religious* experience of your own. You *aren't* just an atheist, are you?"

"I gave you my word of safety," he replied indifferently, "but I never said I would answer you." Stroking his beard, he continued, "Ah, let us play. What is the meaning of *my* name, Catherina?"
He added mockingly: "Catherina: The Pure. The one whose purity *I* personally ensure!"
Ignoring his mockery of her name, she searched him with anxious eyes: "Jonathas... Yonatan... it means 'Yahweh gives'."

Malice dripped from his face: "So, do you like the 'gift' your Lord has *given* you?"
He burst out boastfully: "You'd be better off asking what kind of *great sin* I'm going to make you commit, oh 'Pure' One... Tomorrow... Why not? We shall have time tomorrow."

He opened his eyes wide, leaning in until his face was nearly touching hers. She trembled.
"You do not care for my pain," she whispered. "Nor my death, for that matter. But when it comes to religion, you care. You labor to 'save' me from my stupidity."

He straightened his back, stroking his chin. "No, do not misunderstand me so crudely. I truly do *not* care if your stupidity destroys you. My insistence on your apostasy is merely about the *variety* of the crushing. Every person gives me a different pleasure when I break them in a new way. Understand?"

Jonathas walked away, nudging Catherina's shoulder with his "claw" as he mocked her. "I advise you not to sleep. Spend the night in prayer; perhaps the *Lord* will save you from tomorrow. It will be a trying day!"

As Jonathas' guards passed her like silent shadows, Catherina whispered to herself, "It's as if he *heard* Johannes. Or did *he* teach Johannes?
The same idiocy: finding pleasure in the misery of others. What an excuse."

She rubbed her shoulder, shivering with dread. "I only hope

tomorrow passes gently."

Chapter Four:

Three Against the Leader

Johannes returned from the raid weary and worn. He exhaled a heavy breath, watching the sun dip toward the horizon as he dismounted.
He entered his room to rest and eat, preparing himself to trade his exhaustion for another night of ecstasy in the nearby tavern. He smiled, the memory of swaying courtesans dancing in his mind; how he missed the feel of them in his arms. It was true he had been deprived of his girls for months, but eventually, he had found his way back to his debauchery at the tavern.

He collapsed into a chair in his outer chamber, his hands dangling limply and his legs stretched out after the long day. Jorvoss rushed to pull off his boots and wash his feet, as was the custom.

Johannes yawned, stretching his limbs, and began to fixate on Jorvoss' swollen face and bruised, blackened eyes. He recalled how he had kicked him with all his might the day before—simply because the wretch dared to laugh while Johannes was speaking to Catherina. He smiled to himself.

"Catherina forgot to tell me that God put the face at the top so it could stay high, not so it could be kicked by feet!" he thought. *"Kati... poor, foolish Kati. I can never tell if she loves me or loathes me. How fortunate I am that I snatched her from her kin; otherwise, she wouldn't have looked at me twice in her life!"*
He chuckled inwardly. *"What a girl. Though she opposes me in*

everything, I am drawn to her more than all the beauties of the world."

His mind drifted back to two months ago, when he was struck by an arrow in the shoulder. He remembered opening his eyes through the haze of a fever to find himself enchanted by the sincere, radiant love in her eyes. She had stayed awake over him, insisting on tending his wounds herself. It was that moment that made him vow to change his view of women—to abandon the path of violence and torture against them.

After dining and perfuming himself, Johannes left his room with a light heart, intent on the tavern. He was descending the stairs toward the exit when the sound of Catherina's voice, strained in agony, drifted from somewhere deep within the house.

He paused, doubting his ears. He took a step further, but the moaning came again, and he was certain now: it was her. He turned back to investigate. As he approached the Great Hall, he found his path blocked by two guards deep in conversation. He cut through their chatter with a sharp question:
"Is Catherina in there?"
"Yes, sir. Since this morning."

Johannes's eyes narrowed into a grim stare. He pushed his way into the vast room to find the Leader sitting on his 'throne', arrogant as ever.

Jonathas turned, his voice dripping with mock sympathy.
"Ah, Johannes! You've arrived just in time. Or perhaps a little late. Your wife has been on that chair weeping since dawn. All she has

to do is pull this rope and return to her chambers, but the poor thing simply cannot manage it.
And I, as you see, am treating her with the utmost kindness; I am waiting for her to find her strength without forcing a thing!"

Jonathas' teeth flashed in a broad, predatory grin. Johannes turned his gaze to Catherina. She was slumped against the wall, her head tilted back as if searching for the heavens, but her face was buried in her hands. Her body shook with the force of a total breakdown.

Beside her stood a gallows. At the end of the rope hung a slave woman, bound and broken, appearing half-dead from exhaustion.

"Let us suppose your servant performs his duties poorly," Jonathas said, resting his head on a fist tipped with sharp nails. "What would you do to him, Johannes?"
Johannes clenched his fist. "I would punish him severely until he learned his place."
"And if he were arrogant in his failure? What then?"
Johannes struck the floor with his heel. "He would not survive my boots!"

Jonathas mocked him with a forced radiance. "Ah, well said! Then why haven't you taught Catherina this lesson yet?"
Johannes's tone grew subdued. "She is but a weak woman. I Am the one who handles such matters."
"Julia is a woman," Jonathas countered, "and she has done far worse since she was a child. I fear your wife suffers from a sickness of the heart called '*Religion*.' It prevents her from acting

correctly. We must hurry to *cure* her of it before it is too late... wouldn't you agree, Johannes?"

Under the piercing gaze of the Leader ’s hooded eyes, Johannes’s answer came:"Certainly. What are your orders?"

The Leader whispered the command: "Make her hang her."
Johannes turned toward Catherina with a heavy sigh. He placed a hand on her shoulder and hissed into her ear, "Come now. She is going to die either way. Do not destroy yourself for her sake."

Catherina recoiled, dropping her hands to glare at him with bloodshot eyes, her voice trembling with suppressed rage. "What are you saying, Johannes?! You are talking about a human being like yourself! To—"
Johannes’s eyes shifted nervously. "Kati! Do you Understand what I am telling you? It is just one movement. Grasp the rope as high as you can and let your weight do the rest."

Johannes forcefully hauled the collapsed Catherina from her chair. He fixed her with a hard, commanding stare before thrusting the rope into her hands.
"Look at Jonathas," he whispered urgently in her ear. "He is the one doing this, not you. If he weren't here, none of this would happen. Now, move!"

She swallowed hard, trying to delay the inevitable. Her hands shook as they felt the rough hemp, sliding slowly upward. They flinched as Johannes whispered one final warning: "If you hesitate, or let go too soon, or if it isn't strong enough... she will only suffer more."

Catherina felt as though she were being consumed by flames. she averted her face as if from a furnace, her heart screaming in silent prayer: *“O Lord, this is Jonathas' deed, not mine!”*

She let her trembling legs go limp. Her weight dropped, sealing the final breath in the life of Elisabetha—who was fortunate enough, in that moment, to be spared the sound of Jonathas' cackling laughter. He sipped his wine, intoxicated and proud of his Victory over Catherina’s conscience.

Catherina fell to the floor, surrendered to the mercy of her own soul, shivering in the dirt as her tears flowed like rivers.

Minutes later, once Johannes was certain Elisabetha’s life had ebbed away, he gripped Catherina’s shoulders. "Enough," he muttered. "Get up. Go to your room... you have done enough for today."

Catherina did not answer, nor did she move. He swallowed hard and hoisted her upward, only to find her limbs as limp as a rag doll’s. Blood rushed to his head as he pressed his fingers to her neck, exhaling in sharp relief only when he confirmed she had merely fainted.

Yet, as much as water failed to revive her, Johannes failed to pry her spasming hands from the rope. Her nerves remained locked in a death-grip, as if still clinging to the life that had just departed. Scowling, he severed the cord with a swift strike of his knife, then dragged his wife toward the door, her unconscious weight

stubborn and unyielding against the floor.

The eyes of those remaining in the hall tracked the scene, a hollow silence falling over them as they sought to wash the smirking from their own faces. Their Leader, however, remained perched on his throne, laughing with Julia.
"I wonder," Jonathas mused, "is the rope more difficult than the blade? Stay with us, Johannes—perhaps we shall find out next time!"

Julia chimed in with a jagged sneer. "The creature in her womb must surely be a raven, seeing as we've crossed a hen with a wolf."
Johannes endured the taunt, his jaw clenched so tight his teeth threatened to shatter. He continued dragging Catherina until Jorvoss appeared, helping him carry her to her bed. As Jorvoss brought warm water, Johannes began to pour it over Catherina's hands, rubbing them frantically to loosen the muscles' grip on the rope. When the hemp finally fell away, he splashed water directly into her face.

She gasped awake, her lungs hitching with a terror that clawed at her throat. "Is... is she **dead**?"
Johannes exhaled, trying to suppress the bile of his own rising temper. "Catherina! That is Enough. I kill nearly Every day and Never give it a second thought!"

She wailed as if she hadn't heard him. "Sweet Jesus! Her soul will haunt me forever... Oh, the misery... the shame..."
Her sobs erupted into a crescendo until Johannes's palm cracked

against her face. He hissed, "If you do Not silence yourself This instant, I will send you *After* her!"

The air left her lungs as she listened to Johannes's ragged breathing. "If you are truly My other half," he added with venom, "you must learn How to act. You've made Everyone mock me. You've made them laugh at Me—and at My son. I will Never forgive you for this!"

She pinned him with a gaze like a volley of arrows, her words flowing like molten lead. "Is your upper half the *same* as your lower? Even if I am your 'half,' it does *not* mean I *am* a mirror of your soul."
"Even so! I will not allow you to behave in such an embarrassing fashion! It was a Mere movement! What point is there in weeping, in fainting, in making a spectacle of yourself and an object of ridicule of me... for *her*?"

She surged upright, hovering over him like a hawk. "Johannes, why can you *not* understand? This was *not* a 'movement.' This was **Death**. It was **Pain**. It was an ending... She had dreams! She had—"
"**To hell with her!**" Johannes roared.

In the echo of his shout, Catherina's limbs went cold. She spoke with a voice that sounded already dead. "And I hope **You** go with her. Know this: I **Hate You**. I do not wish to be a part of You. Kill me, torture me if you must. Whatever happens to me, I **deserve** it; I bought My safety with the Agony of soo many others."

She threw him a look of pure loathing before burying her face in her hands, dissolving into a madness of grief. "All of this because of you... You... you dog who brought me here and expects me to Love him? **How** can I Love a Criminal, a Reckless, Cursed, **Hateful** thing like **You**?"

"Wait and see how the Lord will cast you into Hell... headfirst. You will pay for Everything. Every small sin, Every great crime. One by one... Over and over. Your soul will perish without the Mercy of death, and your eyes will melt away while no amount of weeping can save you.."

"**SHUT UUUUP!**"
Johannes's cry rang through the stone room, a primal scream as he clutched his head, gasping for air as if he were suffocating. Catherina, however, revealed a savage smile, her eyes wide and bulging. She reached her hands toward him, her fingers curling like talons, her voice dripping with vindictive glee.
"Go on, take me and Kill me! Torture me and feast on my misery! We shall Meet Again... We shall meet when the scales are Turned Against You! Gouge out my eyes and wait for the day I do it to You! Tear My Flesh in whatever way You wish to experience Yourself later! Throw—"

Johannes clamped his hand over her mouth, silencing her by force as he fought for his own sanity. "Enough, Enough, Enough! **What** has *possessed* you?!"

He mastered his hand, using it to smooth her hair, trying to retreat from the escalation he had caused. He had pushed her

when she needed a sanctuary. Her eyelids flickered, her gaze telling a story of unutterable sorrow.

Suddenly, her brow shifted, and she whispered from beneath his fingers: "If you are a **Man**... then get me **out** of here. Get me out the **same** way You *brought* me in."
She held his gaze with a piercing doubt. "**If You** are a **Man**."

Two helpless tears tracked over his fingers, which were trembling alongside his body as he suppressed his rage. His features softened, and his whisper came out faint and colorless.
"If I get you out, I will **take** your place. I will be sentencing **myself** to the torture. I will…"

Johannes closed his eyes tightly under the weight of the thought. She wept, "It is not my fault; it is **yours**. You **knew** what would become of me. You were the **one** who tore me from my father's hands. **Who else is there to be a man for me now, if not You**?"

Those final words snared Johannes's pride at its peak. Under their weight, his resolve fractured. He withdrew his hands, wringing them together as he stared at them with a fixed, vacant intensity, as if awaiting the outcome of an internal war. Finally, he whispered in a calm, hollow voice:
"Dry your tears and get up. I will take you as far as I can, and after that, you are on your own. Do **not** think of returning to your family or seeking refuge in a convent, lest they catch you. I will not lie to you—it is a desperate gamble. I will fall, and you may fall after me... but it is the **most** I can do."

Before Catherina could truly believe what she was hearing,

Johannes had hauled her from the bed. He sat her in a chair, her face a mask of bewilderment. She felt a sharp tug at the back of her head, followed by a swift, cold strike—and her hair was gone.

The door opened and Jorvoss slipped in quietly with a set of Johannes's clothes. Within minutes, Catherina had been transformed into the likeness of a young man—though a woman in man garments alone. Johannes placed one of his hats upon her head and wrapped a cloth around her face.
"It is the best we can do. Show me how you walk... try to mimic my stride!"
Catherina attempted to walk with a masculine gait, but her swollen belly made the effort futile. Johannes groaned in frustration. "This cursed pregnancy! All that nervous hysteria you were in, and it didn't even flinch?"
"It is moving inside me..." she whispered.

Johannes began to scratch his head with a violent intensity that drew blood, until a sudden comment from behind him stopped his hand.
"It is a good idea," Jorvoss said softly. "But it will never be enough."

Johannes bristled, turning to pour his wrath upon the servant, but Jorvoss continued, his voice steady. "I have been thinking of how to escape myself. I found a good plan, but it required someone to sacrifice themselves to ensure the flight. And so, I thought I was doomed to stay."
The servant looked at Catherina. "But now, I can be the one who sacrifices for her."

Uncharacteristically, Johannes did not strike him. He answered with a firm, quiet resolve. "And are you truly ready to sacrifice?"
"Yes," Jorvoss replied. "I don't live for myself anyway. If the two of you leave, things will only become harder for me here."

Johannes adjusted his stance, swallowing his pride. "And what is your plan?"
The eyes of the young man—whose intellect had been buried under the title of 'slave'—shone with a sudden brilliance. He savored the moment of the master learning from the servant.
"I will lace the guards' brandy. I will spill oil along specific points of the house between the rooms. When the night is at its darkest, I will light them one by one, creating a frenzy to find me.
While the fire rages and everyone is blinded by panic and brandy, you will exit toward 'Montis-Ferrus' through the right-hand window near the foyer. The main door will be far too dangerous."

Johannes stared at him, his suspicion mounting. "And why this window in particular?"
"Because it is the furthest point from the Leader ’s private quarters," Jorvoss replied firmly.

Johannes traced the layout of the estate in his mind's eye. "Fair enough. From there, we take the western mountain pass toward Montis-Ferrus. It is a long and treacherous path for her; she cannot make it alone. I must be with her."

Jorvoss adjusted his strategy on the fly. "But... well, if you intend to return, you must not come back by the same route, nor let

anyone spot you. You bear a **striking** resemblance to the Leader; you would be recognized instantly."

"True," Johannes muttered. "The moment they realize I'm gone, they will comb the area. There's no way I could have vanished far." He rubbed his head, eyes darting upward as he calculated their chances. "We will part ways at Montis-Ferrus. Then, I'll head toward 'Pratus' When they find me there, I will have bought her enough time to escape in the opposite direction."

"Yes," Jorvoss added. "And you must get her onto a carriage. A pregnant woman moves far too slowly for a pursuit."
Suddenly, Catherina snapped out of her nervous state. Her maternal and protective instincts surged, and she cried out in distress, "Does this mean you are both **Sacrificing** your lives for me? I don't want—"

Johannes cut her off sharply. "**Forget** about us, Kati! You **must** do your part, or you'll be throwing our lives away for **nothing**. And **if** we become ghosts after death, we shall **haunt you** forever!"

A grim smile touched Johannes's lips despite his furrowed brow. For the first time, a strange, overwhelming emotion flooded Catherina's heart. She lunged forward, throwing her arms around him with all her might, sobbing into his chest. "I don't know how to thank you... please, believe in God and intend to repent... perhaps you might enter Heaven. I **couldn't** bear being the reason you go to Hell!"

Johannes let out a disbelieving huff. "Kati! Are you the **same**

person from moments ago? Is Hell a matter of **your** whims? When **you** are angry, I deserve it; when **you** are pleased, you try to save me from it?"

Catherina's face flushed deep red. She clung to his neck, caught between a laugh and a sob. The moment lingered until Johannes gently stroked her hair, disentangling himself, then turned to Jorvoss with a sharp nod. "Now!"
Jorvors smiled with a quiet pride, lifting his gaze. "I will knock three times on the door just before I set the first flame."
"Good. We will be ready."

Under the shroud of midnight, Johannes lowered Catherina through the window. From the outside, the fire already seemed to be spiraling out of control in one wing of the massive stone structure. Chaos reigned; some scrambled to douse the flames, others wailed in incoherent terror, while those clouded by brandy saw the fire as a hell they had to flee at any cost.

Taking advantage of the pandemonium, they slipped away into the mountain pass. When they reached the ascent, they faced their greatest challenge. Despite the rugged terrain, Johannes had to move Catherina as quickly as possible without causing her pain—knowing he couldn't rely on the agility of a girl who had spent her childhood within the sheltered walls of a convent.

At a critical moment, as Johannes was half-carrying Catherina down a steep slope, a voice startled them from behind. "Is that little Vilmos? Why have you come this way?"
Johannes barely managed to set Catherina down before he

whirled around, drawing his sword in a silver flash. "None of your business! Save your own life!"

The other man drew his blade, his voice wavering with hesitation. "Easy now... I didn't mean to trouble you. I'm just a guard here, on the Leader's 's orders."

"And that," Johannes hissed, "is your death sentence."
Johannes lunged, the two men clashing in a desperate duel. Catherina shielded her eyes, her body trembling at the rhythmic, cold clang of steel hitting steel.

Her nerves jumped in terror when a hand suddenly gripped her shoulder.
"Come, we must move faster," Johannes's voice was urgent. We've left a trail now; his blood has stained the earth. Speed is a better guarantee than wasting time hiding a corpse."

They hurried past the body, reaching a stretch of road that was somewhat level. Johannes wiped the sweat from his brow and moved to hoist her onto his back, but she let out a piercing cry that cut through him: "My stomach! I can't... Arch!"
His heart sank. He helped her back to her feet and urged her forward, cursing and swearing at the "stubborn pregnancy" that hindered their flight.

After what felt like an eternity, they reached the crossroads leading to Montis-Ferrus and Pratus. Johannes caught his breath, exhaling a long, ragged sigh. "Let's walk a bit further toward Montis-Ferrus until we find a carriage."

She leaned heavily against him, her steps faltering. "I'm sorry for slowing you down... I am so exhausted."
He looked down, his voice tinged with regret. "Don't apologize. This child was My fault. It was clear Jonathas would never let you be, yet I went ahead anyway."

He sighed, a note of finality in his voice. "If the child survives all this... do not tell him of me. Do not give him my name. Let it be as if I never existed."

His words struck Catherina like a physical blow. She hadn't let her mind drift beyond the immediate escape. Her voice grew thick as she hugged his arm, the sting of impending separation burning her throat. "Johannes.. my love.. I will miss you!"
He bowed his head, his voice hollow. "Just make sure you succeed in escaping, so you *can* miss me. Or else we shall die together."

The distant rattle of a carriage reached their ears. Johannes broke into a run, shouting until it ground to a halt. He brought Catherina quickly to the hay-filled cart and opened the back. He reached out to help her up, but instead..

She threw herself into his arms, clinging to him with every ounce of her strength. She pressed a searing kiss to his pale cheek, sensing the profound conflict within a soul that had always been marked by narcissism and possessiveness. She stroked his face tenderly, tears streaming down her cheeks, and whispered:
"I will pray for you every day, Johannes, so that God may save you.
And you, too—remember that the Lord who **knows** the whisper

of your **soul**... He **hears** you!"

He did not smile. Instead, he forced her into the carriage and secured the back, while her eyes remained locked onto his, wiping away tears as the crushing weight of guilt overwhelmed her.

As the carriage began to lurch forward, his voice rose above the rattle of the wheels:
"I don’t need to speak to God, for Jonathas is about to send me straight to Him."

The carriage rolled away. Catherina—clad in Johannes’s clothes—etched into her mind the final image of her former husband as she waved farewell. He watched her for one last heartbeat before turning and running toward the village of Pratus at a desperate speed.

He raced against himself, fleeing the realization that his only key to surviving Jonathas' wrath was disappearing behind him. He ran with every ounce of strength, as if trying to outrun the blackened thoughts that pursued him. For over twenty years, he had watched Jonathas kill, torture, and cackle in ecstasy over corpses. Would he be the next?

After an hour of running, Johannes reached the outskirts of Pratus, gasping for air, his mind at its breaking point. He stood there, hollowed out by tension and ravaged by terror. He lifted his head, touched by a frantic madness, and began to scream.

He knew not where to take himself; he was neither prisoner nor free man.

Against the rough, gnarled bark of a tree, he began to strike his head with rhythmic, violent blows, hoping to silence the voices thundering in his mind and dampen the fire of panic devouring his heart. When his sweat mingled with bloody scratches that began to throb with pain, the futility of it struck him. A tree knows no cure for the head as a sword does.

With a trembling hand, he drew his blade. He leaned it against the trunk, gasping as he stared at the steel that had harvested so many souls. Now, it was his soul's turn. His whisper came through jagged breaths:
"Come on... just one stroke, Johannes. Isn't this easier than hearing Julia’s laughter?"

He closed his eyes, believing himself alone, until his nerves jolted at a strange voice:
"No, it isn't easier."
Johannes whirled around, gasping. "Who? Who’s there? Whoever you are, stay out of my business!"
"I only answered your question," the voice replied. "If you kill yourself just to avoid her mockery, then you’ve helped her achieve exactly what she wants from you."

Fury surged in Johannes. He brandished his sword. "You understand nothing! You’re just babbling... Show yourself, if you’re brave enough!"

The reply came calmly: "Sheath your sword first."

Johannes stared at the blade through the droplets of blood on his face. Finally, he gave in and sheathed it, though his hand remained clamped onto the hilt. "Fine. Show yourself!"

A hand waved from behind one of the trees. Johannes took several steps forward until he saw him: a massive, elderly man in a leather vest, sitting beneath the tree. That was all he could discern in the depth of the dark night.

The man looked at him, his voice tinged with surprise. "You are but a young lad! And you wish to commit suicide?"
Johannes exhaled sharply, turning away as his teeth chattered. "There is no place for me in this life."
"Look at this vast earth," the stranger said. "No place for you in all of this?"

Johannes snapped, his reason fraying. "I have a tyrannical father from whom there is no escape. His men will be here in minutes!"
The stranger shook his head. "Complain of him to the One who is **stronger** than he."
Johannes roared with all his might, "There is N**o** one stronger! He has cursed followers in every one of these surrounding villages!"

Maintaining his cool, the man asked, "Does he not fall ill? There is a power stronger than him, then."
Johannes's spirit felt a flicker of comfort, hearing his own old observation from another. He spoke with a steadier voice.
"Ah... you believe in God. Unfortunately, your God helps no one. Even His own son—He didn't help him; He just watched as he was crucified."

The old man laughed softly. "That is what the Christians believe. But the Lord saved the Christ and did not allow them to crucify him to death, my friend."
Johannes clapped his hands in annoyance. "Don't start a new story with me!"

The stranger went silent for a moment before turning back. "It seems you believe in nothing at all?"
"I have **No** time for **illusions** now!" Johannes shouted. "When I am groaning over my **own** blood, neither your **God** nor **anyone** else will save me."

He turned away petulantly, walking toward the tree he had chosen for his end. He drew his sword again, preparing to harvest his own soul, when he saw the shadow of the old man approaching.
"There is a very beautiful woman over there," the man said. "Will you **deny** her existence simply **because** she **won't** save you?"

Johannes lashed out. "Why would anyone believe in God **except for His power**? As long as He provides me **nothing**, **I do Not want Him**."
"And as long as you Are that way, He does N**ot** want you. No one takes in any but the **Loyal** followers."
Johannes lowered his sword to shout, "I have seen those who gave their **Lives** to Him, and He didn't care for **a Moment** about their agony."
"That is because the agony you saw them in was the **Trial** of their loyalty."

Exasperated, Johannes shook his sword threateningly. "What **use** have they for Him if they are **Dead**?"
The old man didn't blink, anchored by his own certainty. "Death is the **moment** they **meet** Him, you fool!"

Johannes leveled his sword, his eyes flashing with sparks of rage. "I shall cut your head from your shoulders to **test** the truth of what you say!"
With stern eyes, the man replied, "By doing that, I **will** know, but you will **not**."
"No... I will **remain**, and you will **vanish**!"

Johannes swung his sword, and the stranger said even as the blade moved: "The fact that I can **no longer** communicate with you does not mean I have **vanished**."
The sword stopped inches from the old man's neck. Johannes mocked him lightly, "Have you **never** seen a dead person before?"

The man replied with total indifference, "I have worked as an executioner all my life, my boy."
The mockery faded from Johannes's face. "What **did** you mean by what you said, then?"
"Suppose your sword broke right now and you lost your ability to slaughter me. Does that mean *you* have vanished?
Or has your *tool* vanished?"

Johannes lowered his sword slowly, eyeing the man with deep suspicion. His comment was dry: "You mean my body is my tool... Where Am I, then?"
"You are you. Do you not feel **Yourself**? Your will? Your decision?

Would any of that be missing if you cut off your hand, for instance?"

Johannes shook his head. "Don't toy with me. That is the work of my **head** and my **chest**! That is why wine affects it."
The stranger smiled. "Does your body not perform acts **you do not want** when you **drink**?"

Johannes's hand crept up, trembling as it brushed against his own chest. "So... I am **More** than just flesh?" he whispered, his voice thick with awe. "Does that mean death **isn't** necessarily the very **End** of me?"

He shook his head violently, trying to dispel the thought. "No! When I sleep, I feel **nothing**. Total **void**."
"Do you not dream?" the old man countered.
"Those are just my thoughts! And sometimes, I don't dream at all."
"And who is it that lives the dream when it takes shape? Your numbed, motionless body?"

Johannes fell silent, his features frozen in a mask of bewilderment. The old man leaned in, his voice dropping to a haunting rasp. "One of my victims... I beat him until he perished under the torture. Afterward, I went to a tavern and assaulted a woman I had never seen before; I remember being captivated by a mole upon her lip."

"The next morning, I returned to dispose of the body. As I hoisted him onto my shoulders, his voice hissed in my ear: *'We shall have*

our vengeance upon you—I and the woman with the brown mole."'
The old man shuddered at the memory. "I recoiled and flung him away. I killed him again in my mind, yet to this moment, I cannot explain how he knew of that woman. I found his corpse bound in the very chains where I had left it."

Johannes thrust his sword into the dirt, leaning on it for support. "I don't want to die, then. If I were to get trapped in a **nightmare**... it would be **horrific**." Then, his face flushed crimson with a sudden burst of desperation. He clenched his fists and cried out, "There is **No Escape** for me! **Neither** in death **nor** in life!"

"Reconcile with the Lord in the world of the conscious," the old man said calmly, "so that you may find rest in death."
Johannes's breathing grew heavy. "**Reconcile**? How? I know He **exists**, but I know **not** His place, nor **how** to speak to Him."

"He requires **no** 'place.' Physical location is a trait of the weak and the finite. Our Lord is **far greater** than that."
A sense of peace began to smooth the lines of Johannes's face. He stepped closer. "You are the first person to speak to me of the Lord in a way that resonates with my soul."

The stranger smiled, resting a hand on Johannes's shoulder. "I believe in a Lord who is One, Mighty, and Supreme. He has no father, no son, and no likeness. He neither eats, nor drinks, nor tires. He is grander than anything we can conceive."

Johannes recoiled slightly, his voice cracking with emotion. "**Yes**!

That is **exactly** what I believe. It must be so. If He has no equal, He can have **no** kin. And if He is **truly** Powerful, He would not crave food and drink as we do!"

"Then," the stranger asked, "would you like me to teach you how to communicate with Him?"
"Do you truly know how?" Johannes asked, his curiosity piqued. He checked himself, regaining his composure. "Wait—explain to me first: what is the nature of your relationship with Him?"

The stranger led Johannes to a spot where they could sit, his eyes fixed on the vast sky above. "All my life, I was a criminal like you. I caused pain to many, until..."
"Wait!" Johannes interrupted, his brow furrowing. "How do you **know** I Am a criminal?"
"I just told you I was one myself," the man replied simply. "I recognized it in the way you speak."
Johannes leaned back, a flush of shame creeping up his neck. "Ah... yes. Continue."

"Later, I purchased a captive who changed my life."
"A slave? A **slave** changed your life?!"
"Yes. To spare you the details: his strange serenity, his patience, and the calmness in his eyes—even as I poured hell upon him—were enough to make me realize that *I* was the one in hell, *not* him."

Johannes's pride flared. "And how could you bring **Yourself** to yield to a *slave*?"
The man gestured toward the horizon. "I was boiling despite the wine I drank; he was as calm as a stone. I could not even take

revenge on his tranquility, for I was poor—if I killed him, I couldn't afford another. I lived in a state of constant irritation until the question finally **burst** from my lips."

Johannes let out a short, dry laugh as the man continued.
"He said he was a *Muslim*, captured during the wars in the South."
"A Muslim? One of those **savages** the King is so intent on fighting?"

The stranger chuckled softly. "I, too, thought they were savages based on what I heard. But my perspective shattered once I knew this man."
"Incredible. So... are you a Mulsim then?"
The old man leaned in close. "It is pronounced *Muslim*. I believe in the Lord as the Foundation, and I believe He sent a Messenger named Muhammad, just as He sent the Messenger Jesus Christ."

Johannes nodded slowly. "So these men were able to communicate with the Lord, and so He made them His messengers?"
Before he could receive an answer, Johannes bolted upright in a panic. He scrambled behind a tree, whispering urgently, "They are coming! **Quick**, tell me **how** to communicate with the Lord—I must try it for myself to be sure!"

Flustered, the old man stood up, scanning the surroundings. "In the depths of your heart, believe that you are directing your words to the Almighty. **Thank** Him, **praise** Him... and perform **these** movements."

The old man demonstrated: he stood and placed his palms on his knees, keeping his back and head in a straight line. He stood straight again, then prostrated, placing his nose and open palms flat upon the earth. Finally, he sat back on his heels with his hands on his thighs. "This is it," he whispered to Johannes. "Humble yourself before the Powerful One, and your heart will find its rest."

He began to slip away into the shadows. "Good luck."
"Wait!" Johannes called out. "What is your name? Where can I find you if I make it through?"
"I am Wilius," the man called back. "I live in this quarter here. Farewell!"
Wilius vanished into the labyrinth of alleys, fleeing the approaching thunder of hooves that began to echo through the village. Johannes retreated into the shadows of his hideout, his breath hitching.

This is my last chance to end it, he thought, the cold edge of suicide beckoning. *But if I do, I'll miss the chance to reach out to the Lord... and besides, what if the Lord is already furious with me for defiling His creation? His wrath would surely be more terrible than Jonathas'.*

He looked toward the sky and sighed. "*I can't believe I was moved by a story in the end. Here is a plan: I will try to reach the Lord now. If it proves to be a deception, I'll take my life right here before they lay a hand on me.*

Staring into the vast expanse above, he whispered to his soul: *I must direct my thoughts to Him... I must offer Him my neck, then prostrate. I don't know if I can bring myself to do it... but wait. I have prostrated to Jonathas countless times just to dull his rage; can I not do the same for the One who judges Jonathas and commands him? I can.*

Johannes took a deep, shuddering breath, closed his eyes, and murmured: "O Most Powerful, You who have fated us to die... I am speaking to You!"
He knelt as Wilius had taught him, stood, and then cast himself down. As his forehead touched the earth, a strange, profound calm flooded his chest. His nerves uncoiled, and his fingers gripped the soil.

Minutes passed in that sacred silence until he sensed someone approaching. Before he could move, a pair of rough hands hauled him upward by the arm, and a gravelly voice barked in his ear:
"Have you seen a young man with black hair and a girl with brown hair? Strangers?"
The man didn't wait for a reply. He dragged Johannes out from the trees, shouting to the others: "I've found Vilmos! He's right here!"
Men swarmed them instantly, hounding Johannes for Catherina's whereabouts. He remained silent, a hollow statue. Since they were not authorized to maim him, a squad marched him back toward the mountain while the others continued their frantic search.

By the time they reached the stronghold, the fire had died down to smoldering embers. The stone structure remained largely

intact. They dragged him into the great hall where Jonathas was pacing, a boiling cauldron of fury. Jacobus sat nearby, slumped in a chair, a shadow of gloom.

When the men entered with their captive, Jonathas fixed his demonic eyes on his prey, poised to strike. Raphael, the man who had found him, stepped forward. "I found him sleeping on the ground among the trees of Pratus, his face bloodied. He offered no resistance."

Jonathas let out a low, predatory growl. "And the third—the -*-? Where is she? Did you not find her?"
Raphael flinched. "Not by the time we left, sir, but the search in Pratus has been intensified."
"Sleeping on the ground?" Jonathas hissed, his voice trembling with spite. "What is that supposed to mean?"

At Jonathas' nod, the men threw Johannes at his feet. Jonathas delivered a kick with all his might, his face contorted.
"You burn the place down and plot against me? Me, your master! You, whose head belongs beneath my boot!" He roared, "How dare you try to run off with her? Did you think I couldn't pluck you from the gates of Bellavar itself? Has that wretched mouse driven you completely mad?"

Johannes said nothing. Jonathas unleashed a barrage of kicks. "Where is she? Where did you **Hide** her? **Speak**, or I'll paint the floor with your own **blood**! I swear by **My power**, you will pay **ten** times over, even if they find her!"
Despite the rain of blows, Johannes remained deathly silent.

White-hot with rage, Jonathas seized him by the collar, hoisting him up in a single, violent motion. "Are you **Defying** me, you piece of filth?"

Johannes trembled, his swollen lips moving to produce a hoarse, broken whisper: "I am not defying you... I truly do not know. She was with me in Pratus, then I lost consciousness. I woke up in Raphael's grip. I don't know what happened."

Jonathas backhanded him across the face, a stinging crack that echoed in the hall. "**Lying** to **Me** too? You expect **Me** to believe you burned this place and fled to Pratus **just** to take a **stroll**? Do you take **Me** for a fool?"

He hurled Johannes to the floor. Johannes coughed up blood, but the beating and the insults continued until the sun began to crest the horizon. The search parties returned empty-handed; Catherina was gone. Jonathas sat in his chair, fuming, beginning to accept that this was a losing battle.
Even the lowliest beasts grow savage when protecting their mates. A full night had passed; Catherina was likely miles away, and her trail was growing cold.

He turned his gaze to Johannes, who lay in a literal circle of his own blood. He found a dark amusement in the sound of the boy's moans and muffled sobs. He decided then to recoup his losses through pure, unadulterated vengeance—to let the pain seep into the depths of the boy's soul until it rotted, so he could take pleasure in tearing it apart. He would not give Johannes even a second to savor his success.

Jonathas exhaled, unaware that the one detail he lacked was that Catherina was dressed as a Man. His men had passed her carriage dozens of times, never giving it a second thought because they were looking for a woman. She lay there, her lower half buried in straw, her short hair hidden under Johannes's wide-brimmed hat, drowning in her own silent prayers.

Later, one of the men entered the hall. "Sir, we have tortured the 'Red' all night as ordered, yet he insists he knows **nothing**. Shall we continue the intensity? He may die."

Jonathas gnashed his teeth, his nails digging into the upholstery of his chair. "He commits such crimes and thinks he can die in a **single** night? **No**! *Torture* him, but **keep** him **alive**. I want him to endure *as long as possible!* "

Even the slave protects her! Jonathas screamed internally. *What made them both sell their souls for her? It makes no sense!*

As for Johannes, he spent the following days drowning in a stupor of agony. He was kept beside the leader's chair, a trophy of broken flesh. Whenever his groans grew faint, Jonathas would give him another measure or two of pain.

His soul was shattered, his pride ground into the dust beneath Jonathas' feet. But the sharpest sting—the pain that hurt more than any lash—was the haunting memory of the moment he threw away his chance to die.

Chapter Five:

Johannes the Captive

Johannes was cast once more at the leader's feet, a mangled heap of flesh and agony. Jonathas appeared calmer now, having spent three consecutive days venting his volcanic rage upon the boy.

He raised his heavy boot to strike again, but Johannes collapsed against his legs, clutching at them in total ruin. He began to plead with a broken, jagged sob—a sound born more of hollow humiliation than physical pain. Starvation, thirst, and the deprivation of sleep had brought him to the very threshold of the grave.

In these fleeting moments lay his final hope, despite knowing the callousness of Jonathas' heart—a heart that recognized no kin and held no map to mercy. When no answer came, Johannes resumed his begging, a lament that seemed to tear at the very fibers of the soul.
"Please... give me a chance to atone for my sin," he choked out. "I will serve you exactly as you desire, until you are satisfied. Grant me one last chance... I will do anything. You are too great to be truly angered by a wretch like me."

While Johannes's face struggled to weep or even speak through the grotesque swelling and deep, purple bruising, Jonathas' features were lit with a sadistic ecstasy. He feasted on his

own tyranny, savoring the limitless power to avenge himself.

Yet, Jonathas' only sorrow was that even these moments were finite. Johannes's body—once pampered and soft—had reached its absolute limit. To push further now would be to lose the toy. Thus, Jonathas sated his pride with this display before moving to the second phase of his vengeance—a plan that would make Johannes curse the very moment his betrayal had succeeded.

After a long silence, Jonathas pressed his boot down upon Johannes's head. "Very well. I shall be '**gracious**' and grant you the chance to be one of my lowliest slaves—those who **toil** so that I may **enjoy** my life and live as a king!"

He turned to one of his men, his voice as cold as granite. "Take him to the mines. Order them to show him no mercy, no pity, and no quarter. He is to be treated exactly like the other slaves!"

A violent shudder went through Johannes. He was not surprised, yet the realization that his greatest fear had become reality was a fresh torment. To sharpen the blade, Julia's voice rang out with mocking delight:
"I find myself suddenly curious to oversee the progress of the work down there this week!" She laughed, a sharp, cruel sound, while blood welled in Johannes's swollen eyes, stinging his vision into a blur.

As they hoisted him up to drag him toward his bitter reality,

Johannes whispered with a surrender that saw nothing: "At least... honor **Your** face that is within mine."
Jonathas' expression went still at those words. He averted his gaze, waving a hand dismissively. "Strike him only on his back and legs."
"Shall we feed him first, master?" one of the men asked. "He is completely spent."

Jonathas exhaled, eyeing Johannes's condition with a cold practicality that reminded him a man cannot work if he is dead. "Feed him and tend his wounds for one day only. By this time tomorrow, he must be broken into the labor."

The men hauled Johannes away to meet his fate. Julia followed them for a few steps, waving her handkerLeader with playful malice. "Every time you look up at our rooms from the pits, I'll be there, waving to you from above!"

The following day, Johannes walked with a leaden gait down the sloping path to the depths. Each step was a heavy tread upon the pride that was being crushed within his heart. He had walked this path countless times as a master; now, the world had inverted. Every familiar sight bared its teeth, revealing the darkness that had long been hidden from his fading conscience.

He wondered, with a sinking dread, how the slaves would react when they found one of their former masters among them. Amidst all his agony, his singular hope was that no one would recognize him. But in a place built on memory and

pain, what was the chance of that?

As they descended, the biting chill of the cavern pierced his weakened body. A cold dread seized his limbs as the rhythmic thud of pickaxes and the sharp crack of the lash reached his ears —sounds that had once been a distant, routine background hum behind his window, but were now the grim reality to which he would be subjected like a beast of burden.

He was shoved into the labor ring, forced to endure his searing pain as he shuffled in a frantic circle, hauling coal from the mine to the wagons outside.

Only three hours remained of that day, yet to Johannes, they felt like an eternity. His body was a map of unhealed trauma; his vision was narrowed by lids heavy with swelling, and his movements were sluggish from days of starvation.

When the work finally ceased, he stumbled toward the great pen with the other captives, blinded by a shame that stung worse than the fire in his back and legs. His greatest fear remained a constant throb in his mind: *What if one of them knows who I am?*

The salve drivers dumped two crates of food onto the dirt floor of the pen and slammed the door shut. The battle of the shadows began. Driven by the raw instinct of survival, the male slaves descended upon the food like starving predators. Johannes retreated to the furthest corner, watching them with a curled lip of disgust. Had there been anything in his stomach, he would

have retched; the stench of the pen was overwhelming, with filth cluttering every corner.

Once the men had sated themselves, the women scrambled for the remains in the dirt, while children hovered behind them, waiting for a stray scrap of pity. Johannes buried his swollen face in his hands. He realized now the blessing of the meal he'd been given that morning, but how long would it last?
Could he truly bring himself to bicker with these people tomorrow? In that moment, he decided he would rather starve to death than sell his dignity in such a primal, animalistic fashion.

From time to time, he lifted his head to watch the ghostly figures shifting in the dark. Slaves huddled together for warmth, while thieves tried to snatch morsels from others, stuffing them into their mouths before they were caught. The air was thick with the wailing of children, the brawling of men over sleeping spots, and the sharp tongues of women arguing over the men.

This was a world entirely foreign to Johannes. To him, luxury had never been a choice—it was the air he breathed. He had been raised to believe these people were merely his uncle's livestock, and that he, by virtue of his blood, stood superior to all. Where did that superiority go now, as he sat condemned to this wretched fate?

He closed his eyes, broken, lashing himself with the whip of regret. He had traded his life for Catherina, a girl who would surely soon forget him while he toiled here forever. A slow, bitter anger began to simmer in his heart at the image of Catherina safe and sound, while he burned in the fires of humiliation.

Through the gloom, the sound of a woman approached. Johannes curled into himself, trying to hide as much of his face as possible. She stood beside him for a moment before speaking.
"Catherina? Is that you?" she whispered. "It took you months to find your way here... What happened? Did you actually marry Johannes or what?"

Receiving no answer, she continued, "Come on, I know this place is worse than the cells—dozens of men instead of just Jorvoss—but you'll get used to it like last time. Come, don't just sit there crying as if it's your first time!"

When silence persisted, she reached out toward the shadow of Johannes's head. The moment she touched him, she recoiled. "Oh! A man! Why didn't you say something? A grunt would have sufficed to let me know I was wrong!"

She lingered for a moment, then spoke again, her tone softening. "You must be new. I was just as shocked the first time I entered this hole. It's disgusting, I know. We've grown accustomed to it, but everyone relieves themselves here and there isn't enough water and..."

She sat down near him. "You must be hungry, like me. As you can see, the men control the food. The only way for a woman to get a decent meal is to stay with one of them in exchange for bread, and..." She sighed heavily. "I lost my partner a few days ago. Fever and exhaustion. I haven't been able to fight the others for a new one; they're all like she-wolves."

She paused, turning toward him in the dark. "I was thinking... perhaps you and I could partner up. What do you think?"
Johannes remained a statue. She mused aloud, "You know, your scent... it's familiar. Where have I smelled that? Where...?"

She reached out to touch him again, but Johannes violently shoved her arm away. She stumbled back, letting out a sharp, involuntary gasp: "**Impossible**!!"

The cry rang through the pen, drawing the eyes of the other captives. She clamped both hands over her mouth, her eyes wide with shock. She waited until the others lost interest before leaning in and whispering, "Unbelievable... M-m-master? What has brought *you* here?"

Johannes hissed through gritted teeth, his voice a low, dangerous vibration. "Shut up! Do not call me 'master.' Do you want to get me killed?"
"Yes, I understand... I'll call you by your name... if that doesn't offend you." She swallowed hard. "You have every right to be disgusted by this place. It is certainly beneath you."
She shifted nervously. "I am Isabelle. I don't know if you remember my name, or even knew it. I'm the one with the blue eyes and black hair. The third girl who..."

"I remember you," he muttered irritably.
"I'm glad," she whispered. "If you need help or... a service, you need only command me. I am at your disposal."
After a long silence, she stood up. "It seems you wish to be alone

today. I'll be over there. Call me, or just signal, and I'll come at once."

She moved to sit a short distance away, while Johannes muttered to himself, nearly gnawing on his own hand in frustration.
She thinks I'm still someone important, he thought bitterly. *She thinks I still have some shred of power. She doesn't realize that I am currently the lowliest wretch among them. Soon enough, she'll abandon me—or worse, turn against me.*

Pain drove its blade deep into him, and he writhed under the agonizing weight of his ruined pride. He tried to escape into sleep, but despite his exhaustion, it eluded him. The valley's piercing chill froze his marrow.
He lay in a state of wretchedness, dreading the passage of the long night, knowing full well that tomorrow would be even harder.

As soon as the first light touched the world, the gate of the pen creaked open. At the sound, everyone leaped from their sleep instinctively, racing for the exit. Johannes dragged his leaden feet, finally staggering out last. The executioner raised his lash before speaking:
"You don't know the rules yet: the last one out gets whipped."
Johannes fell silent, bracing himself, but the slave driver added, "We'll start that from tomorrow."

Johannes glanced at him, a thought flickering in his mind as he walked:
I thought Jonathas ordered them to show me no mercy. Did he

change his mind? Or are they still wary of me, fearing my eventual revenge? Perhaps I should ignore Jonathas' orders and use his shadow as my shield while I still can.

He tried to square his shoulders and turned to the driver with a feigned air of confidence. "Do you have any food?"
The driver recoiled as if remembering a duty, then opened his pouch. "Um, yes... this sandwich. Eat it quickly."

Johannes bolted the food and hurried to join the others. Another driver approached him. "Would you prefer to dig, haul coal, or pull the wagons?"
Johannes looked toward the dark mouth of the mine. "I'll try digging."
"That requires skill and focus. I'll explain it to you..."

Johannes turned his swollen face toward the man. "That means I won't be able to do it quickly. No... I'll go back to hauling coal."
The driver smiled, understanding that Johannes wanted the task that kept him moving fast enough to avoid the lash. A third driver placed a hand on Johannes's shoulder. "Don't hold a grudge against us. We're only following orders."
Johannes exhaled sharply, averting his gaze. "I know. Just don't overdo it—especially at the end of the day. Even the strongest man breaks eventually."

Johannes worked with frantic efficiency, burning through his dwindling reserves of energy just to survive. But that was only the beginning. By the time the sun began to dip, he was on the verge of collapse. Yet, he feared the return to the pen. He felt

suffocated, his chest tightening under the weight of a life that offered not a single thread of hope.

Before he entered the pen, the driver handed him another sandwich, whispering, "Hide it. And contrary to what I told you this morning—stay back. Come in last so the others don't see you."
Johannes retreated to his corner, his mind racing faster than his feet could move. *At least the last one out escaped the whip.*

After avoiding the chaotic brawls over the floor-scraps, he was stunned to find a man and a woman sitting in his spot from the night before. He glared at them before catching himself. He scanned the place for another space, but the only empty patches were beside the filth.

Rage began to boil over his exhaustion. His breath quickened, his heart hammering against his ribs as he paced. Then, he heard Isabelle's voice calling:"Over here! Here!"

He moved toward her without hesitation. Once seated, he gestured to the space beside him. "There's room for both of us. Come."
She squeezed in beside him. "I didn't want to bother you."
"There's nowhere else," he snapped, then softened slightly. "You look exhausted. Didn't you eat anything last night?"
"I ate the dirt the food was sitting on," she whispered, clutching her hollow stomach.

Johannes turned away and bit into his sandwich, tearing at it as if

to take revenge on the hunger gnawing at his vitals. But as he felt her thin body trembling and shivering next to him, the bite stuck in his throat. He realized that if she starved, he would lose his only ally. He fought a fierce battle with his own greed before finally speaking in a choked voice:
"Fine. You shared your spot; I'll share mine."

He tore the sandwich in half—feeling as though he were tearing his own flesh—and handed a piece to her. She gasped with joy.
"Shhh!" he hissed.
"I'm sorry," she whispered, swallowing hard. "But... imagine how long it's been since I even smelled meat! I don't know how to describe my happiness!"

"Happiness?" Johannes sneered. "In this place?!"
She shrugged. "This is life for us. We have to squeeze the happiness out of it wherever we can."
Johannes didn't care for her philosophy, nor was he full on half a sandwich, but he yawned as the crushing weight of the day caught up to him. Suddenly, he felt Isabelle's hand pull him toward her thin chest. Before he could complain about the scent of unwashed toil, his eyes closed, and he vanished into a deep sleep, making up for the previous night's vigil.

He didn't wake until Isabelle was shaking him. "Quick! Get up! Everyone is already out!"
She bolted for the door. Johannes collapsed back onto the dirt, his body shackled by pain. He closed his eyes again; he simply couldn't force himself to face another day of agony.

Two minutes later, he bolted upright as the crack of a whip sounded beside him. He tried to pull himself up but failed. The driver grabbed his arm and hauled him up impatiently. "Please, don't make me hurt you."

Johannes staggered, forcing his weight onto his feet. "Give me a moment. I'm going... I don't understand how morning came so fast."
He choked down his breakfast while trying to rub the crust from his swollen eyes with as little pain as possible. He pushed himself out, a heavy shroud of despair over his soul.

Throughout the day, he stole glances toward the grand building perched at the edge of the valley. He remembered Julia's mockery and thought, swallowing his deep sorrow:
If Jonathas caught Kati after all this, I'll lose my mind. But no—if he had her, he would have dragged me up there just to taunt me with the sight of her in his hands. I've lived with him for years; I know how he thinks.

As sunset approached, Johannes actually looked forward to the end of the shift. At least there was someone to lean on, someone to share the misery. But suddenly, the Chief driver called for him. Johannes approached slowly, gasping with fatigue. The driver looked away, seemingly ashamed to see him in such a wretched state.

"Miss Vilmos is here. She wants to see you."
Johannes recoiled, his fists clenching. "**No**! If I see her, I'll pelt **her** with coal!"
"Perhaps she has something important to tell you."

"I'll only see her to **stuff** her mouth with **coal**... and light it!" Johannes shouted, turning back to his work.
The driver gave a short laugh. "I see the coal has taken over your mind."

That night, Johannes went to sit by Isabelle, but two women suddenly grabbed his arms from either side. Each insisted that *she* would be the one to stay with him. Johannes, bewildered, wrenched his hands free.
"What is wrong with you? What do you want?"
"Master... I am Alisia, don't you remember me?"
The other cut her off. "And I'm Maria. You used to love my blonde hair."

Johannes snapped, turning his face away. "You two are here as well? How did you recognize me?"
"A master's gait and his pride cannot be hidden."
"I hope your face heals soon, Master.. it's clear you've had a hard time."

He scowled at them. "Don't you have partners?"
"Isabelle will stay with one of ours instead, and everyone will be fine," one replied. "You just have to choose which of us you want."

Johannes stood paralyzed, caught between three choices instead of one. The women, of course, had no inkling that their "Master" might end up bargaining with them over a mere scrap of meat from his sandwich.

But secrets in a pit of despair have a way of bleeding out. Person

by person, the word spread until, within mere days, every slave knew that the newcomer was none other than young Vilmos. Every one of them carried a memory of him—most of them bitter, jagged, and steeped in resentment.

The slaves fractured into two groups: those fueled by spite and those driven by sycophancy. Johannes's name was on every tongue. Where he once struggled to find a patch of dirt to call his own, he was now ushered into the best corner. Men seeking favor offered him morsels of their meager rations, and women vied to spend the night by his side.

They all harbored a desperate, delusional hope: that one day the Leader's heart would soften, he would rescind the punishment, and Johannes would pluck them from their misery.
Only Johannes understood the true gravity of his predicament. He knew Jonathas; the man's words were iron, and his decrees only ended when they drew blood.

Johannes lived in constant fear—not just of Jonathas, but of the moment the slaves would grow weary of him or turn against him. He spent his days agonizing over what he could offer to keep them gathered around him. If not for the sake of status, then for protection against the vengeful faction that waited for the slightest slip-up to rain down agony upon him.

In truth, the only currency he had was his secret sandwich. He began to barter it—half to a man, half to a woman, in a rotating cycle—in exchange for the foul swill they were fed. Meager as it was, it proved enough to maintain the fragile peace.

The long, brutal winter passed in a blur of bodies huddled together for warmth. Then came the beautiful spring. Yet, its splendor only filled Johannes's heart with a deeper melancholy. He watched the world dance in vivid colors under a warm sun, blooming over the literal bones of men and children whom the cold and disease had claimed.

He worked with a shattering spirit, watching the remains of his fellow captives tossed to the edge of the valley, left to the scavengers. The dread of death turned his face pale and his soul wretched; he knew death was the only escape from Jonathas' infinite shadow.
And yet, for the first time, a peculiar bitterness of loss seeped into him as he remembered their hollow faces, their suppressed hopes, and their final, whispered words.

Butterflies danced through the valley, fluttering over his head—witnesses to a man living the same miserable day dozens of times without mercy. He ignored their beauty, lost instead in his ancient search for the One more powerful than Jonathas; the One who might finally break the tyrant's grip.

That night, he decided to give that "way" another chance—the ritual that had stayed his hand from suicide. He used his fingers to pry his eyes open, fighting the crushing weight of exhaustion. He waited until the pen grew still and his partner drifted off, then he hauled his aching body onto his knees. He began those small, rhythmic movements that pain had nearly scoured from his memory.

He directed his broken spirit toward Absolute Sovereignty. With

every prostration, as his forehead touched the dust, he found not humiliation, but a "contentment" he hadn't felt in years.

After a few minutes, he collapsed into sleep. In his dreams, he saw Jonathas—pale, sickly, and calling his name as if in desperate need. But dream-Johannes only looked at him with indifference, shut the door, and walked away, leaving the tyrant to his fate.

He continued this every night. Nothing in his outward world changed; his food did not increase, and his toil often grew heavier. Yet, he realized he had gained the same thing that the captive who changed Wilius' life had possessed:
A heart of stillness in the center of the storm.

Serenity became his only narcotic. He grew addicted to it, using it to intoxicate himself against the coal dust, to forget the sores on his fingers and the ache in his back, and to tune out the monotonous, never-ending crack of the lash.
He began to pray in his mind constantly, distracting his soul by magnifying the Lord and contemplating the mysteries of creation, rather than dwelling on his own wretched luck."Greetings, cousin... or should I say, your uncle’s slave? Guess what!"
Johannes stood before the Leader’s daughter. His black hair and eyes were now masked by coal soot, grime, and the gauntness of starvation. Yet his hideous state did not stop her from preening. She fought back a laugh.

"My delicate body grew weary from sitting on ostrich feathers for too long, so I decided to take a stroll in this 'lovely' valley for the spring. Lucky for you, I’ve chosen you from among the rest to have the honor of serving me!"

The Chief driver winced at her crude arrogance, glancing sympathetically at Johannes. Johannes, however, kept his eyes fixed on the sky, showing her no emotion at all. Then, he looked at her and smiled.
"A fine opportunity to show you the beauty of nature here. Have you ever smelled the mountain flowers? They are as lovely as you."

The driver's jaw dropped. He turned slowly to see Julia's face flush a deep, indignant red. "Fine then, let's go! You will wait on me!"
"I don't mind," Johannes replied calmly, "as long as you aren't afraid of the scabies."
She recoiled in disgust. "You have the itch?!"

Johannes smiled mockingly and lifted his forearm. "Oh yes. Look... it tunnels into the skin and lays its eggs inside, in exchange for the drops of blood it takes every so often. Would you like to try it?"

He began to run toward her. She shrieked, scrambling to get away, but she tripped over her own weight and landed hard on her hands. As her servant helped her up, Johannes's laughter echoed through the air, even as the driver caught him without effort.
"You coward!" Johannes shouted. "Don't you know I can't even reach you?"

She knitted her brows, staring at him with a strange, unreadable expression before her mocking mask returned. "I'm glad you've found the place that **suits** you, you mangy beast. I'll tell my father

how **much** you're **enjoying** yourself. Farewell!"

She hurried away, taking the scent of her expensive perfume with her. The Chief driver chuckled. "I wonder which part of that conversation she'll actually tell him." He turned to Johannes. "I liked how you used your knowledge of her to face her down. You have a powerful spirit, truly."
Johannes exhaled. "What did you expect? She came to feast on the sight of my helpless rage."

As he returned to his work, he stole a glance at the great house on the ridge. *O Most Powerful,* he murmured, *I beg You to take Your strength and squeeze the consciousness of Jonathas. Crush his ego as he crushes us. You gave him forty years of power—is it not enough?*

Time crawled forward until a day arrived that seemed like any other. The night appeared normal; food was fought over, partners were chosen, and whispers faded into the rhythmic snoring of the exhausted.
Johannes slipped away as usual for his brief prayer. But the moment he prostrated, he felt a violent surge of movement from the far side of the pen. Before he could react, a heavy palm clamped over his mouth, and he was hauled upward. He found himself surrounded by the shadows of several men.

A voice hissed with pure, concentrated venom into his ear:
"I don't know what kind of animal stupidity struck that bastard Jonathas to throw you into the hands of Old Simon... but I am going to pour thirty years of bottled rage onto your head!"

Panic seized Johannes the moment he realized his life was held in the iron grip of the leader of the rival slave faction. He could find no way to break free, nor any breath to cry for help. Simon leaned in, his voice dripping with sadistic satisfaction.

"Forgive us for delaying your vengeance this long," Simon whispered. "A chance for retribution comes but once, and we needed to be alone to truly savor it. I only wish I could see that bastard's face when he lays eyes on what remains of you; only then will he realize what he forgot, and remember what he did!"

With a violent shove, Simon ground Johannes's face into the dirt. Another man pinned him down, and they began to rain blows upon him, striking with a calculated, deadly silence.
The assault continued until, suddenly, Isabelle's voice pierced the dark, screaming to the loyalist faction: "Vilmos! They're killing him! Get them! Get Simon!"

At her cry, life surged back into those weary, slumbering bodies. They rose as if they had been waiting for the signal, plunging instantly into a bloody fray with the rival group. The air filled with the sounds of bone hitting bone and snarled curses. The pen descended into absolute chaos; women's screams punctured the air, and children scrambled to escape a blind battle where no one knew if they were striking friend or foe.

Suddenly, the heavy doors of the pen were kicked open. The drivers burst in, their lashes crackling as they laid into the combatants, who had no choice but to scatter, howling in pain.

Once the drivers had regained control, their head moved through the gloom, searching among the bodies strewn across the floor. When he couldn't find Johannes, he began lifting the fallen. He finally discovered him, buried beneath two others. He hauled him up, shouting, "Get the doctor, quickly!"

Johannes regained consciousness to a sound he had missed—a dry, rasping voice, but one he knew, in his own way, he loved. He opened his weary eyes to find himself in the drivers' hut. Jacobus's hand was gently wiping his face.
"Awake at last? Hah, you survived!"

Johannes's reply was a mere rasp, strangled by agony. "There isn't an inch of me... that doesn't hurt. Agh..."
Jacobus clasped his hands together, his expression animated. "It was shocking news! Even Jonathas sat up in surprise; he thought Simon was dead ages ago! It seems there was a 'misunderstanding'—they kept him alive as a slave instead of finishing him off. But he'll wish he were dead soon enough, once he feels the heat of Jonathas' hospitality!"

Jacobus let out a mocking laugh, but then another voice—bright and laughing—joined in. "You have no idea how happy I am that you survived, cousin! And that Father finally allowed us to visit you!"
Johannes's brow furrowed instantly. "What are you doing here, you fat cow?"

"Checking on you, you scrawny thing!" Julia replied. "How strange—why don't you take better care of your health, you poor

wretch? Guess what gift I brought you!"
The heavenly aroma of fresh cake reached Johannes's nose just as Julia popped a piece into his mouth. "I've discovered I don't like seeing you like this," she said playfully. "Now, eat!"

Johannes swallowed the morsel with difficulty. The contrast was jarring; the softness of Julia's skin felt alien after weeks of the calloused, rough hands of the slave women. He managed a ghost of a smirk. "Careful... you might catch the scabies."

Julia's hand recoiled as if she'd touched a hot coal. "Scabies! Oh, no! Damn it, I forgot!" She shook her hand in disgust, her lip curling. "I'll leave the cake here. When you want it, take it!"
A faint smile finally ghosted across Johannes's bruised face while Jacobus let out a belly laugh.

After a brief chat, Johannes looked at the older man and asked, "Father, who exactly is Simon?"
Jacobus rubbed his face, his eyes distant. "He was a partner of ours. We used to ride out together to raid for many years. When we finally seized control of the mountain and grew to about twenty men, Jonathas decided he should be the Leader of the gang. He gathered the men, bribed them, and convinced them to oust Simon.
Afterward, he picked them off one by one—each man meeting a 'convenient' end."

Jacobus chuckled softly, his voice tinged with a dark irony. "It seems I'm the last of them still standing."

Johannes's eyes widened, and he whispered, "Thirty years... he

waited thirty years for a chance at revenge, only for me to be delivered to him on a silver platter."

"Heh," Jacobus scoffed, shaking his head. "But I doubt Jonathas feels his so-called 'revenge' has been satisfied yet. He's barely allowed you five days of rest before sending you back to the grind." He paused, his expression hardening. "You fool. How did it even cross your mind to challenge him like that? Haven't you seen how he crushes **everyone**, friend or foe? Whoever that woman was, was she **truly worth** throwing your youth away for?"

Johannes closed his eyes, offering no answer. Julia leaned in, her hands on her hips. "If you know where she is, tell us. Perhaps then he'll agree to see you, and you can make amends."
"I told him everything," Johannes replied flatly. "And my hope isn't for his forgiveness anyway."

She threw her hands up in exasperation. "And what is your hope then? To remain with the slaves **forever**? **You're mad**!"
Johannes looked toward the window, his gaze distant. "Jonathas won't live forever."
She recoiled as if stung. "Really? And do you think whoever comes after him will save **you**? On the contrary, you must **exploit** his presence **now**, or your situation will become **utterly hopeless**!"

A shadow of misery crossed Johannes's face. Julia softened her tone, but remained firm. "Listen, I'll try to intercede for you. I'll tell him things about you that you never said yourself. But don't you dare let my efforts go to waste. Do we have an agreement?"

He turned his eyes toward her, weighing her words. "I must be hallucinating. Is that actually **you saying these** things?"
Jacobus and Julia both laughed, but the conversation was cut short; their permitted time was up. Johannes watched them until they vanished, his ears straining to catch the fading echo of their footsteps.

An hour later, stifled by his own thoughts, Johannes strained every muscle until he managed to sit up, gasping for breath. When his eyes fell upon the cakes waiting for him, tears blurred his vision. In that moment, it wasn't the sweetness of the cake that burned his throat, but the bitter longing for a discarded dignity—and the painful realization that his salvation now hung by a thread held by Julia.

Chapter Six:

The Atheist Turns Christian

As is the way of things, good days hurry toward their end, making room for their opposites to take hold. Despite the agonizing pain Johannes still endured, he bid farewell to his respite with clinging eyes, rising from his bed before the driver. He dragged his weary body toward the mine, submissive to Jonathas' decree.

Upon arrival, he froze in shock. "What is this? Faces I don't recognize!"
"That's right," the driver replied. "We replaced them all. The Leader decided to 'reorganize' things after what happened."
Johannes's eyes went wide. "And where did the others go?" his voice trembled with shock.

"They worked without food until they collapsed, and then we threw them to the beasts."
"But many of them fought the attackers!" Johannes cried out, his voice cracking. "They saved me in the hope that—"
The words died in his throat. The driver placed a hand on his shoulder. "That was their **duty**. You should have told us from the start that you had enemies; we would have used the others to keep them in line."

Johannes bowed his head, his features hardening behind a mask of grim silence as the driver's hand nudged him toward the labor. His soul was a battlefield: on one side, the lash of the drivers taming the new slaves; on the other, the ghosts of his departed

companions who had left the world with hollow bellies and extinguished hopes.

The roar of the coal could not drown out the memory of Isabelle's scream—the scream that had saved him. It echoed in his depths like a boulder crashing down a ravine. The final image of his old life sat in his memory like a festering wound, searing him with the heat of betrayal every time he drew breath. He moved through his day as if swallowing gall, his body broken by toil and his spirit slaughtered, finding no path to escape.

Exhausted by the grueling day, Johannes sat in the darkness, sighing as he held his sandwich. He watched the movements of the new captives with sad curiosity. He was struck by how three of them were dividing the food among the group fairly. No one fought; no one showed resentment toward their peers. Their only bitterness was directed at their captors.

It was clear they had been snatched from their villages only days ago; their peasant clothes still held their shape, though they were beginning to fray under the bite of the lash. Their hushed talk was the beginning of the despair that comes when one realizes the true nature of their prison.

He was still staring at his sandwich—the key to his previous social standing—when a desperate whisper drifted into his thoughts. He turned to see a mother in the gloom, clutching two boys who were weeping and writhing with hunger. In a moment of uncharacteristic selflessness, driven by a need to escape his own isolation, Johannes held out his sandwich. "Perhaps this will help

you," he offered.

The mother's face seemed to light up. She grabbed his hand and kissed it with joy. "You are a good young man. It is in these trials that the true metal of a person is revealed!"

She took a bite, then split the rest in half for the boys. They cheered as if the tears had never touched their cheeks. The eldest, sharp-eyed, nudged her. "I knew you were hiding food, Mother! I knew it!"
"No, my son," she said. "This kind young man here gave it to us. Go on, hug him and thank him!"

The boys rushed to give Johannes a warm, genuine embrace before dancing away to devour the bread. Johannes laughed at the sight, trying to suppress the swell of emotion in his heart. For the first time in his life, he had given something away without expecting a return or offering an insult.

Suddenly, a heavy silence fell over the pen as a man stood up to address the crowd.
"Beloved of Christ, my brothers and sisters," he began, his voice resonant. "Know that the darkness surrounding you is not the final word. Christ himself walked the path of pain before us, and he transformed the cross from an instrument of torture into a gateway to life. You are helpless today, but no one can enslave your hearts if they cling to hope."

"Do not look at your wounds as punishment, but as the means by which the Savior purifies your souls and strengthens your faith. As

gold is refined in the fire, so are your spirits refined in this trial. Every tear you shed is kept by the Lord, and every sigh becomes a prayer rising to the heavens."

"Remember that Christ said: 'In the world you will have tribulation, but be of good cheer, I have overcome the world.' You are not alone; you are partners in his suffering, and partners also in his coming glory..."

Johannes listened, mesmerized. It was the first time he had experienced such an atmosphere or heard a sermon like this. Finally, the man said: "Let us cry out to the Father from the depths of our hearts, and turn away from evil and vice in this darkness, that God may answer our groaning and turn our sorrows into hope."

In an instant, the crowd was submerged in a sea of reverence. Murmurs of supplication rose, mingled with the sounds of honest weeping. Johannes was the lone, silent witness. He was torn by the memory of Catherina and her prayers—prayers he had never given the slightest thought to, viewing her faith as nothing more than a fairy tale.
But seeing this diverse crowd, bound by nothing but this shared belief, planted a question in his soul he had never known before.

After a while, the mother finished her prayer and turned to Johannes. "I didn't hear you praying with us?"
"I'm not a Christian," Johannes replied.
"You're not... **what**?! Are you a Jew?"
"A Jew? What's that?"

She looked puzzled. "What do you mean, 'what's that'? A Jew, of Judaism!"
"I don't know it. Another story?" Johannes asked. "What do they believe in?"
"They don't believe in Christ, but they believe in the Lord."
"That," Johannes murmured, "is very interesting."

She exhaled sharply, her voice thick with indignation. "And why? Why do you harbor such a specific dislike for Christ?"

"I don't know him," Johannes replied bluntly. "But regardless of who he was, I cannot believe he is the son of the Lord."

"That is a pity," she said, her tone softening with a touch of condescension. "I saw a kindness in you and hoped you would be among those Christ redeems." She paused, narrowing her eyes. "But who are you, then, if you are neither Christian nor Jew?"
"I simply believe in a Sovereign Lord. I try to reach out to Him; I feel Him with my heart. I don't know what you call that state."

The woman traced a sign of the cross in the air near him and murmured, "I pray the Lord guides you."
Johannes shot her a sharp look. "If I were Christ, I would hate you all!"
She recoiled, visibly offended. "May Christ forgive you! Why would you say such a thing?"
"Because you broadcast the most hideous moments of his life constantly. Do you have any idea what a man looks like when he is crucified?"
"Of course," she snapped. "We see them at executions, and we

have the icons in the church."

"Yes, and it’s far too grotesque for anyone to take as a symbol—unless they were fueled by spite."

Her voice rose to a shrill pitch.
"Jesus! No! You suffer from a profound misunderstanding. We do not love the moment of his crucifixion for its own sake; we hold it as a symbol to remind us of his sacrifice for our sakes.
Did you not just hear the Deacon say, 'The cross was transformed from an instrument of torture into a gateway to life'? We learn from him how to turn pain into joy with the Lord!"

Johannes yawned, abruptly changing the subject. "Why are the women huddling over there?"
"To stay as far from the men as possible."
"Everyone here is strange," he remarked with his usual bluntness. "This is the most bizarre night of my life." He turned to her with a casual suggestion: "Will you sleep with me?"
She erupted like a sudden storm. "How **dare** you speak to me like that? Is *this* why you gave me the sandwich, you... you animal?!"

Johannes shrank back, startled by her ferocity. "No. You could have just refused without all the shouting."
"Are you even sane? Go find someone like yourself!"

The woman grabbed her two children and hurried away toward the cluster of women, leaving Johannes in a state of bewilderment. He truly didn't understand why she was so angry. As he lay down, he muttered to himself, "I'm starting to wish I

could ask Jonathas why he hid this world from me, even though he knew it existed."

He stared upward, his mind drifting. *Christ sacrificed himself for them... but why would he need to sacrifice anything if his Father can do all things?* He sat up suddenly, a thought striking him. *I wonder, did Christ anger his Father the way I angered mine? On the other hand, Catherina should really wear a symbol representing my sacrifice for her instead of that cross!*

He let out a dry laugh. *But she'll keep sanctifying the cross. She's probably become a nun by now. I wonder if the child has been born yet, or if the pregnancy even survived. I hope she didn't end her life over the thought that she killed that maid, or lose her mind.*

He stood up and stretched. "I'll never know. Regardless, I'll pray too."
He stood to direct his heart, but his tone was dejected, his hunger finally gnawing at his resolve. "O Most Powerful, You didn't even protect me while I was praying. I know I am a wretch and I don't matter to You, but give me a sign of Your existence. Don't let me feel like I'm just a madman."

Johannes slept alone that first night, simmering with resentment at the village women who had rejected and insulted him so violently. He found himself pining for his lost authority, wishing he could show them exactly what they had lost by spurning him.
He thought back with a heavy heart to how Isabelle, Alisia, and the others used to fight over him, and he grew bitter toward

Jonathas, whose indifference had made a bad situation intolerable.

The hardships intensified the next day. Johannes felt as though his head might split from a mounting migraine. He spent the entire day working to the rhythm of cracking whips, the screams of women, and the endless wailing of children. The drivers were in a foul temper, meting out double punishments for the slightest errors—kicking, insulting, and cursing.
He realized, with a shock, that the "tamed" slaves of the past had been a blessing he hadn't appreciated.
When the shift finally ended, he stood at the back of the line to the pen. He snatched his sandwich from the driver with a visible flash of anger.
"It was a hard day," the driver muttered. "When one new slave arrives, we worry until they're broken in. But forty at once? It's chaos."

"My head feels like a drum," Johannes snapped. "At least you get to sleep somewhere quiet."
"Is there no hope of you returning to your place soon?" the driver asked. "We're all waiting for it, quite impatiently."
Johannes sighed and took a few steps before the driver added, "Is everything alright in there? Stay close to the door, so you can call us if any trouble starts."

Johannes scanned the place as the sound of weeping died down. He watched them divide the food fairly again, and suddenly found them pressing a portion into his hand as well. He added it to the sandwich in the pocket of his new tunic.

As he went to find a spot, he felt fingers on his shoulder. He turned to see the shadow of a man behind him. "May I speak with you a moment?"
Johannes frowned. "Are you the one who was talking about Christ yesterday? I recognize the voice."
"Yes. I am a deacon in the Church of the Virgin..."
"What do you want with me?" Johannes interrupted irritably.

"To be honest, I had a strange dream last night about a young man among us here. He was the son of a leader... someone important. A voice in the dream told me this young man has vital religious questions."

Johannes's throat went dry. He froze for a heartbeat before averting his gaze. "Sweet dreams."

He turned to leave, but the deacon caught his shoulder. "Wait. The drivers avoid you, and I just heard you speaking to one of them quite familiarly. I am certain the vision meant you." His voice dropped to a whisper as he shrugged."Though I cannot fathom why an important person would be performing hard labor and sleeping in a stench like this."

Johannes looked down as the deacon continued, "Do you have a religious dilemma? Or do you need help...?"
Johannes exploded. "Isn't it **enough**, everything I'm **suffering**?! Now I can't **even** sleep with a **filthy** woman?! And all because of your **Christ** and your... **your** religion!"

The deacon placed a steadying hand on Johannes's shoulder.

"Easy, easy, my brother!"
"**How can** I be '**easy**' when I'm here with **more** than fifteen women and I can't get near one of them **without** her screaming in my face?!"
The deacon placed his other hand on Johannes's shoulder, his voice calming. "I understand your problem. Come, let us sit and talk."

Johannes sat devouring his sandwich with a scowl, while the Deacon sat beside him, taking a slow breath.
"I understand your anger," the Deacon said, "for I am a man just like you. But look—a woman **also** has the right to be dignified, to have her **own** sacred space where she only admits the one who **honors** her."

"That is the very problem you people created when you started distributing the food fairly!" Johannes snapped.
The Deacon looked shocked. "Is **distributing food fairly** a problem now?"

"Yes! Before, the men had something to *entice* the women with. Because of **that**, everything was fine."
"What do you mean 'before'?" the Deacon asked. "Everyone here was kidnapped only days ago and—"

Johannes cut him off, his words sharp and fast. "There were thirty-seven here before you, and they were all killed. I am the only one who..." He trailed off, a lump forming in his throat.

"K-k-killed?" the Deacon stammered, horrified. He steadied

himself and asked, "And **were** those women happy? Or were they **forced**?"
"Hap—or let's say, they were **content**."
"Content?" the Deacon countered. "The same way we are 'content' to take a handful of food in exchange for a full day of misery?"

A cynical smile flickered across Johannes's angry face. The Deacon continued: "**Justice** is taking responsibility for the woman you desire—providing for her, protecting her, and bearing the burden of a child if one comes. That is how the Lord is pleased with the purity of the bed."

"Don't hide behind the Lord," Johannes growled. "He is the **one who made** her weak, and He **is** the one who made me crave her whether I want to or not. Guess what the result is after this 'arrangement'?"
The Deacon paused. "You have sharp teeth made for biting, don't you? So, do you bite everything you see, or do you choose?"
"What does that have to do with anything?" Johannes asked, repulsed.

The Deacon touched Johannes's hand. "It is the same. You have the power to do with any woman, but you must choose and limit yourself, so as not to harm yourself or those around you.
To use your need as an excuse to exploit the weakness of women is **exactly** what the master of this place does by exploiting our weakness. Do you believe he is **not** in the wrong?"

When Johannes remained silent, the Deacon added: "By the way,

for your wife to believe you are her **only ma**n is a psychological pleasure in itself—and the same for **your children**. You were created strong to be the pillar of a family!"

A memory flashed in Johannes's mind—how Catherina used to shrink away from anyone but him. He realized then that he had savored being considered *her* man; it had made it easy for him to sacrifice everything to save her.

The Deacon added, "How can we expect the Lord to look upon us with mercy and redeem us from this tyrant, if we ourselves oppress those who are weaker than us? We must be just even in our pleas to the Lord; like the two plates of a scale!"

The Deacon balanced his palms in the air. Johannes let out a faint whisper. "Justice... a word I never heard except in Jonathas' mockery."
"Your name is Jonathas?"
"No, I am Johannes. Fine—if the Lord loves justice as you say, why did He make animals prey on each other? Why the law of the jungle?"
"There is justice even in that," the Deacon explained calmly. "Just as animals prey on others, they are preyed upon. They live in the same danger they pose to others.
Moreover, without predation, the carcasses of animals that multiply every day would be scattered everywhere. I don't think I need to explain what would happen to life then."

Johannes replied dismissively, "The same applies to humans; any of us may conquer or be conquered."

The Deacon turned his head to process the thought, then turned back. "How do you feel about the *master* of this place, who enforces that law of the jungle?"

Johannes let out a sigh heavy with sorrow. The Deacon smiled. "That ***is*** why the Lord established justice—because He does *not* want you to have to heave that sigh!"
Johannes shifted his position, narrowing his eyes at the man. "If this were truly His will, He wouldn't have let people break it."

"And if the Lord forced people to carry out His will, **Where** will their love for Christ be tested?"
Johannes waved his hand dismissively. "God **doesn't** need to test us. He knows **everything** about us."

"But *we* do not know ourselves. We need a reason for our destiny. Imagine if you opened your eyes to find yourself in Hell for no reason. How would you feel?"
"Exactly how I feel now," Johannes said. "I was born without a will of my own."

Suddenly, Johannes was jolted as a small creature rushed toward him and huddled between his legs. To his surprise, the child's sob broke through, barely intelligible: "Food... give me food... please."
Johannes recognized him; it was the same boy he had fed the day before. The child clung to his legs, begging with a heart-wrenching voice. But Johannes's resentment toward the boy's mother bubbled up in his mind. He kicked the child away. "Get away from me! You won't get my food unless there's something in return."

The child curled into himself and replied innocently, "But I have nothing to give you, Uncle."
"Oh, there **is** something..." Johannes began with malice, but the Deacon lunged like a hawk, pulling the child away and pressing his own portion of food into the boy's hand. "Take this. Don't **ever** ask **this** man again, my son."

The moment the food touched the boy's hand, he let out a joyful laugh, hugged the Deacon gratefully, and ran back to his mother. Johannes's furious voice followed him: "What business is it of yours, you—!"

The Deacon's voice didn't waver. "There. You chose evil. You are **not** as 'will-less' as you claim. You just failed your test. Your selfishness is **no** different from the selfishness of the master of this place."

Johannes let out a diabolical laugh, relishing the Deacon's shock before saying with bared teeth, "*Well said*. He **is** my father, and I am proud!"
The Deacon recoiled, the words dying in his throat. He shook his head in disgust. "I understand he is your father... but to be *proud* of him? At least not while you are down here!"

Johannes finished the rest of his sandwich and shrugged. "Actually... he is my father, and I am *not* proud."
He stood up as the Deacon called after him: "Remember, the Lord gives you time *because* you are in a trial. But when it ends..."

Johannes lingered for a moment, listening, then walked away.

When he stood to pray as was his custom, he found he couldn't direct his heart to the Lord this time. The Deacon's words buzzed in his mind like a live wasp.

He shook his head and whispered in a rage:
"Who said the Lord wanted me to feed the boy anyway? Maybe the Lord *loves* the law of the jungle. Maybe He *delights* in His own power when He sees the weak suffer."

He abandoned his prayer in a fit of pique. *I have enough of Jonathas delighting in my suffering,* he thought. He lay down to sleep, grinding his teeth, tossing and turning in a sharp, bitter mood.
The echo of his soul cried out: *I am alone in this world. They are all my enemies. No one even cares how I feel.*

Johannes began the next day with a shattered spirit, consumed by the feeling of being an outcast. Things grew worse when the handle of his coal bucket snapped. He fell, and the heavy coal stones crashed onto his feet. He screamed, writhing on the ground and cursing in a fit of peak rage.

He clutched his foot, trying to check for broken bones, when he was startled by the crack of a driver's whip nearby. Johannes snarled at him, "Get away from here! Don't you see what happened to me?!"

The driver, breathing heavily, replied, "That's not how I work. Get up, or else!"
Johannes bit his lip and tried to rise, but a bolt of agony shot

through his foot. He doubled over on the ground, gasping. But the grace period was over, and the whip rained down on him without mercy. He endured it, then growled, "**Stop**! **You'll** regret it if you **don't** stop!"

The driver raised his lash again. "I cannot show you leniency."
"Go and call your head.. I'll speak to him."
"I **can't** leave my post. Isn't it **easier** just to stand up?"
"I think I broke my leg and—"
"Not my concern. Tell the Leader about it."

The whip began to fall like rain again. Johannes collapsed under the weight of the torture, curling into a ball to minimize the damage, his leg having failed him. Minutes felt like years as he swallowed the bitterness of humiliation. Finally, the driver stopped, shouting, "I'll give you a chance. I'll be back."

Johannes lifted his head, tears of pain blurring his vision, trying to extinguish the burning fire across his back. He wiped them away and tried to stand before the driver returned, but the pain in his foot was so electric he didn't dare try again.

He spent the time gathering the scattered coal back into the bucket, then knelt, battling the pain and watching for the driver. He looked up at the window of his old room, dreaming of his bed, until his tears blurred his sight again. *Until when? Is there no end to your wrath, Father?*

He leaned his hands into the dirt and sobbed, knowing that a broken foot was a death sentence here. He seized a moment of

quiet as he watched the driver striking someone else on his way back. Panic shrieked in his heart.
He turned his eyes to the sky, then cast himself down in prostration:
"Please... help me this once, and I will **stop** defiling Your creation. I swear by everything dear to me... save me!"

The executioner arrived with a low, predatory growl.
"I gave you a long enough grace period," he spat, his voice rasping like gravel. "Why haven't you stood up? You're forcing my hand, sir. You're making me hurt you."

Johannes swallowed hard, the dryness in his throat catching. He reached out an arm, not in plea, but in a grim command. "Pull me up. Perhaps if I can just stand, I can limp my way through it."
The giant hesitated, a flicker of something crossing his face before he hauled Johannes to his feet. Johannes swayed, putting his weight on his good leg.
"See?" the executioner remarked. "The rot is in your head, not your foot!"

Johannes fixed him with a stare of cold, concentrated venom. "**Remember this moment**," he whispered, his voice trembling with suppressed rage. "Because **I will make you pay** for it. Dearly."

The executioner's bravado faltered. The color drained from his cheeks as he hurried to retrieve the bowl, handing it over with a hurried, stuttering apology. "It isn't personal, sir. If I bend the rules, it's my neck on the line."

Johannes scorched him with a look, his fingers gripping the bowl —its handle snapped and jagged—like a weapon. Then came the moment of reckoning. He took a tentative step. Expecting the lightning bolt of agony that had previously crippled him, he was met instead with a jarring silence from
his nerves. He took a second step, then a third.

A bewildered sense of wonder washed over him; he almost refused to believe his own senses. As the executioner called out a question behind him, Johannes simply looked toward the heavens in wordless gratitude and walked on.

In the hours that followed, something in Johannes shifted. The questions of the divine began to gnaw at him with a new urgency. He sought out the Deacon, eventually finding him huddled in a dark corner, his silhouette writhing in the throes of some internal misery. Johannes steadied his nerves and sat.

"Why is it," Johannes began without preamble, "that you believe God favors *weakness* over **strength**?"
The Deacon bristled, his defense sharp despite his frailty. "Compassion and mercy **are** the *true* marks of **strength**, Johannes! They are **not** weaknesses."

Johannes gave a stubborn, cynical smile. "No. The strong man does as **He** wills. He does **not** bow to the whims of others."

The Deacon’s moaning ceased for a heartbeat. He turned hollow, sunken eyes toward Johannes. "It is quite the opposite. **Mercy** is

the **zenith** of power. No one can *truly* give **unless** they possess a surplus—a strength that **overflows** their own need."

Johannes scratched his chin, grappling with the weight of the man's words. "Fine. You have a point there."
"And that," the Deacon wheezed, "is why God can give to us all; because **He is the Mightiest**. If He loved tyranny and brute force, would He not have fashioned us into creatures of malice? Would He not have left us in perpetual, mangled agony?"

Johannes sat bolt upright, his eyes widening. "**You're right**! How did I miss that?" He paused, adding in a low, shamed hiss to himself: "My mistake was that I defined 'strength' by the likes of Jonathas."

Suddenly, a fresh wave of hunger tore through the Deacon. He collapsed, writhing in a losing battle for self-control. Johannes felt a pang of guilt; he could almost smell the phantom scent of roasting meat lingering in his mouth.
"What is your labor here?" Johannes asked urgently. "Do you dig, haul, or pull?"
"I... I pull..." the man gasped.
"Listen. Tomorrow morning, meet me when I load the coal into the wagons. I'll slide some food to you."
"May... Christ... bless you," the Deacon managed.

Johannes's face darkened with irritation. "I want **God** to bless me, **not Christ**!"
The Deacon, clutching his stomach, whispered through the pain, "Can the sun bless you without its rays? Christ is the spoken Word of God in our world."

{{ If you are not interested in the details of the religious debate, Go to the end of the bracelets (((

"Enough of that," Johannes countered, his voice ringing with confidence. "Am I the same as my father? Right now, my father is drinking himself into a stupor with harlots, while I sit here, soothing an empty belly and looking for the least filthy patch of dirt to sleep on. Can you say he and I are one?
We share a face, and I carry his name—Vilmos—but we are worlds apart."

The Deacon sharpened his fading voice. "You don't understand. It **isn't** a physical union like a **human father** and son; it is a union of Divine Essence. When God desired to show His **love** for **mankind**, He sent Christ—His **Second** Person—to inhabit their frailty and save them. To see Christ is to see God."

Johannes gestured wildly to his own chest. "And when you look at **me** now, you **see** my father! We share the **same** essence of a gangster. Does that make us one? He is the most powerful man in this mountain, and I am the lowest. **How** can you call us *one*?"

The Deacon traced a faint cross in the air. "A King puts on the rags of a beggar to visit his subjects in prison. Does his poverty negate his crown? God wore your helplessness to **share** your pain, **not** to lose His majesty."

"Look at me!" Johannes cried, gesturing to his soot-stained skin and his miserable surroundings. "**Do I look majestic to you?** Does my presence here, starving alongside you, make your hunger any

less biting?

A powerful, loving King should **enrich** the poor, **not** become just another *mouth* to feed!"

"No!" the Deacon cried out. "A King who only gives gold remains a *stranger*. But the King who **loves** the poor *so* much that he hungers with them becomes **their** brother. Christ did **not** come to abolish poverty; He came to give **you** a dignity that *hunger* **cannot** break."

Johannes folded his arms, his resolve hardening like iron. "As for me, I would rather *kneel* at my Father's *feet* and receive **strength** and **plenty**, than **writhe** in the **dirt** alongside him as we *both* starve."

He leaned in toward the Deacon, his voice a low, burning vow. "The **Strong** One who shares His power with *me* **out of love**—that **is** the God I am *looking* for."

Johannes tightened his fist, his voice thick with defiance. "No man bound by hunger and need like me could ever be my Lord. This cannot be the God who created me—if that were so, then my mother and father would be more deserving of that station!"

The Deacon leaned in, his explanation surging with renewed fervor. "No, Johannes. Christ was **no** ordinary man like your parents. He is as **light** emanating from fire. The Lord is 'Father' because He is the *wellspring* of **love**, and Christ is 'Son' because He is the *embodied* image of that **love**."

He gently patted Johannes's back, his tone softening. "Your trouble is that you view the world through the *narrow* lens of *power* and *self-interest* ; you do not yet grasp the ecstasy of infinite **love**."

Johannes shifted his weight, a sudden, sharp movement of his foot betraying his inner tension. When he spoke, his words were heavy with realization. "On the contrary. Today, I realized the *true* value of being **loved** by the **powerful**. And because of that, I thirst for more of His love..."

"Beautiful!" the Deacon exclaimed. "You have confessed your thirst; now you must turn to the Source. Christ used His **power** to drench us in His **love**—raising the dead, healing the sick, silencing the storm, walking upon the waves..."

Johannes turned away, his voice grating with irritation. "He has **not** raised me, **nor** healed me, and I have **never** seen him walk on water. I haven't **even** seen his face.

On what basis should I worship him? There isn't a single shred of proof that he **even** existed—**how do I know** he **isn't** just a story conjured by a deceiver?"

The Deacon's voice remained sweet, untroubled. "We do not need to see miracles. His Resurrection is **our** miracle. Can you imagine a man, crucified for **over** a day, **rising** from the dead and **walking**? Christ conquered death and agony to give us hope. That is why He is the Son of the Living God!"

Johannes let out a dry, cynical half-smile. "When he comes to visit these lands, let me know so I can believe he rose. Until you **show** me something, or **cite** something I can actually witness, your words are not evidence."

The Deacon's tone leveled. "And you... do you see the Lord?"
Johannes struck his chest firmly. "**Yes**. I **see** Him!"
The Deacon scoffed. "Truly? Show me how."
Johannes ignited with passion, his contemplation pouring out of him. "Since I was a boy, I have been awestruck watching Him turn the water of a foolish man and woman into a human being who feels and thinks!
I see Him ruling over all men, even the mightiest, taking their lives against their will, steering their existence according to His eternal plan.
You see them singing of their lusts, using that fleeting ecstasy to forget that they are compelled by it!"

He paused for a heartbeat, leaning in until his nose nearly touched the Deacon's. "Does this happen on its own? No! There is a Power that controls everything, whatever we name Him—the Lord, God, the Controller. He is here, governing all!"

The Deacon pulled back, wiping his face. "Yes, well said. But my point was exactly that: you cannot see Christ with your eyes, **just** as you cannot see the Lord. Therefore, you cannot deny Christ's existence, his miracles, or his Great Resurrection simply because they are **invisible** to you."

Johannes's voice sharpened. "You don't understand me. The Lord

was, and still is, giving life and taking it, long **before** I existed and long **after** I die. But of Christ, you speak in the past tense: he *raised* the dead, he *healed* the sick, he *walked* on water. Is this a God? He is of no use as a God—not even to that storm that began without his permission!"

The Deacon recoiled. "And what makes you so certain he cannot still do those things now?"
"Ask instead: what proves to me that he *does*?" Johannes countered. "Look at the universe, its precision and its vastness. Give me one piece of evidence that says this continues to happen by a person with **these specific** traits called '**Christ**,' and **not** by the Lord Himself. Give it to me. I'm listening."

The Deacon's eyes narrowed. "I tell you that Christ is the Lord **Himself** in His eternal, divine essence. How can you ask for something the Father did that the Son did not? It is like a **thought** in the mind. Christ said: 'I and the Father are one; he who has seen me has seen the Father!'"

Johannes fell silent, sharpening his thoughts like a blade. Finally, he spoke. "If that child over there came to you and said, '**My father and mother are one; he who sees my father has seen my mother**,' what would you understand?"

The Deacon did not answer, merely taking a deep breath. Johannes continued. "You would understand that they are **so deeply in love**, so **perfectly** in harmony, that they represent one another to such an extent that seeing one is as good as seeing the other. You wouldn't think they were literally the same person or

shared the same nature—that they were both men or both women—would you?"

He gestured emphatically. "And from Christ's words, we understand the **same**: that he loves the Lord and represents His teachings to the letter."

The Deacon interrupted sternly. "You are merely searching for a meaning that serves your own ends!"

"That is because I start from the principle of the Lord's **absolute** greatness," Johannes fired back. "I cannot accept that one of His 'persons' is a son who is born, crucified, and killed. Look at all this majesty and power everywhere! How can you accept reducing it to such a fragile form of life?"

The Deacon gazed at a child nearby, weeping from hunger. "On the contrary," he replied. "The purpose is for the Lord to have mercy on our weakness, and to teach us how to transcend agony toward His mercy."

**{{ To Here))) **

Johannes turned away, exhaling a long sigh. His eyes fell upon the shadow of a young man propping up an elderly father, both broken by the sting of the lash. He turned back with a devastating question. "Tell me, why did the Lord create fatherhood and son-ship in all creatures?"

"So that their lineage may continue and life may endure," the

Deacon answered.
"Then does the **Eternal, Everlasting** Lord need a son to continue His life? Or is He merely **playing**? Or did He feel **jealous** of His own creations? Which of these do you accept for your Lord? **Which one**?!"

The words stumbled in the Deacon's mouth. He chose silence for a long moment, glancing around anxiously to ensure no one was eavesdropping. Finally, he leaned in and whispered,
"To be honest with you... there is a Christian sect that believes Christ was a Messenger from the Lord, not the Lord Himself. The title 'Son of God' is a metaphor for the depth of the Lord's love for him."

Johannes let out a triumphant cry. "Now you speak the truth!"
The Deacon grabbed him quickly. "Lower your voice, please!"
Johannes didn't understand the need for such secrecy, but he lowered his tone.
"The Lord is the one who gave Christ the power to raise the dead and heal the sick, and it was He who raised Christ at his resurrection. Just as my father used to give me some of his strength in my days of glory, before he deprived me of it now."

The Deacon coughed, bowing his head. "I realize now why I am here. The Lord wanted to teach me a lesson—that He can grant wisdom **even** to criminals, using examples from their own world."

Johannes laughed heartily. "And I won't hide it from you either; my lesson was that wisdom can be found even among slaves!"
"Wait a moment! I am **no** slave!" the Deacon protested. "I have

been free all my life; it was **your** gang that kidnapped me!"
Johannes burst into laughter. "Yes, I suppose I keep forgetting that!"

Johannes walked a few paces away before turning back. "What do you think about praying with me today? Try it. It seems strange at first, but it brings peace to the chest."

"What do you mean 'try it'?" the Deacon asked. "Didn't you see us all praying yesterday?"
"No, not just with humbleness or folded hands. You can bow and prostrate while directing your glorification to the Lord."

"You mean as Christ did," the Deacon noted. "He would put his face to the ground while speaking to the Father."

Johannes looked stunned. "And after that, you tell me he is the Lord **himself**? Was he prostrating to himself? Imagine my father bowing to his own reflection—it would be **hysterical**!"

He smiled, then added playfully, "Come then, let us pray as Christ prayed!"
The Deacon stood up, leaning on Johannes's hand. "I see you believe in his existence now!"
"I don't mind him being a teacher. Existing in that way **doesn't** conflict with the Lord's greatness. On the contrary, I **wish** the Lord would send me a teacher like him!"

The Deacon seized the opportunity, his face lighting up. "Aha! That is the heart of it. Christ is the Father's Messenger to you, to

teach you what the Father wants from you, so that every man doesn't have to wander and speculate as you are doing now."

Johannes scratched his head. "I can accept that, as long as his message can be proven through reason."

"Yes, but once you accept him as a teacher, you **must** submit to his message even when reason falls short. You cannot encompass the Lord's wisdom or deduce it every single time."

Johannes's response came in a low murmur. "Fine. I suppose so."
"Then, would you come to the church to learn the Lord's teachings, if the chance arose?"
Johannes gave a knowing smile, his eyes narrowing. "If the church **believes** in the Lord's absolute power and Christ's **messenger-ship**, then yes!"

They shared a brief laugh before the Deacon added, "Then, you are a Christian, Johannes."
Johannes didn't comment. Instead, he began showing the Deacon how to bow and prostrate in his own way. They did so together, side by side. When they finished, they sat on their knees, their thighs touching. The Deacon reached out and took Johannes's hand.
"It is a good feeling. You feel the Lord is near."
"Didn't I tell you?" Johannes replied. "That's why Christ did it!"

But the Deacon's voice turned weak and serious. He clutched his stomach, his back hunched in pain. "Listen to me... I feel this is my last night. If the Lord has tasked me with teaching you, let us

put sleep aside tonight and speak of Christ's teachings. Perhaps your father will change his mind soon, and you won't have another chance to hear the truth again."

"Can you?" Johannes asked. "You look like you're in agony."
"I won't be able to sleep regardless. It would please me to do one last good deed before I die."

And so, Johannes spent the night listening to the Deacon, who spoke through labored breaths and winces of pain. Johannes bit his lip, wishing he had given the man his entire sandwich, regretting the wretched state that clouded their final conversation.

In the morning, Johannes pushed himself to the limit. He even endured several lashes to delay his shift in the coal line so that he might cross paths with the Deacon's shift at the wagons.

He finally reached him. The Deacon was dragging his feet more than the wagon, his back bent double from hunger. The driver's lash had added to his torment. His eyes sparked with a desperate light when he was secretly handed a meat sandwich. He shoved it into his mouth all at once, terrified of being caught. But as soon as Johannes turned his back, the sound of violent coughing pierced the air.

The Deacon was coughing so hard he began to choke. He collapsed to the ground, gasping for air, but his breath didn't return until the sandwich lay spat out on the dirt. Within seconds, a slave driver arrived, raising his whip. Then he paused. "What is

this? Meat?"

The driver turned his gaze toward Johannes. "Is this why you were stalling? I was wondering what had gotten into you."
Johannes looked at him, flustered, then said shamefully, "Cover me. Don't tell."
"You know the rules. You know how your uncle will react if he finds out you're feeding the slaves."

Johannes's face went pale, a sense of helplessness washing over him. The driver began to lash the Deacon again, gesturing to Johannes. "Get back to work."
"Whip me instead, or I'll work double! Just forget what you saw!"
The driver screamed, "I said get back to work!"

Johannes rushed through his tasks, seething with fear of Jonathas' reaction. He had come down to this valley out of pity for Catherina—what hope for his own forgiveness was there now after this new transgression?

He worked with a wandering eye, searching for his friend the Deacon, but he could not find him among the standing, nor distinguish his voice from the cries of the suffering.

The sun was at its zenith when a driver led him to their head. The man sat Johannes down, pacing around him nervously. "If the food is more than you need, you aren't forced to take it."
"More than I need?" Johannes snapped. "If you gave me ten, I'd eat them all."
"Then why did you give it to the slave?"

Johannes fell silent; there was no excuse, no lie that could save him. The Chief driver continued, "How can you be moved by pity when you're this gaunt yourself? Are you really a Vilmos?"
Johannes's voice was barely a whisper. "Just cover for me. I've had enough trouble."

"Eat your sandwich in front of me, and don't let me see another act of pity, or I'll tell him everything."
"Thank you!"
Johannes bit into his sandwich, feeling a momentary relief. "But... did the Leader order you to be lenient with me?"

The Chief driver glanced at him. "Why else do you think we do it? Do you think we're mad enough to cross his orders?"
A flicker of hope touched Johannes's face. The driver added, "Just so you know, you're getting on all of our nerves... I don't even know the risk I'm taking by hiding this for you."

"Does he ask about me often?"
"He doesn't ask. But I know he listens whenever I speak of you."
"Fine. Don't hide it then."

The Chief driver looked hopeful. "Are you sure?"
"He won't have mercy on **you** if someone else snitches. But at least there's a chance he might have mercy on **me**."

The Leader smiled. "Well, you've unburdened me! But don't blame me if the punishment is harsh."

When Johannes finally entered the pen, he searched for the

Deacon until he was at the brink of despair. Finally, he asked those distributing the food. A woman's voice, heavy with sorrow, answered him.
"Didn't you see them when they killed him? Him, Alexandra, and her little boy?"

Johannes recoiled in disbelief. "Killed him? No!"
"And Alexandra," the woman continued. "She went mad when they killed her little son, so they sent her after him. And now there is her eldest son... he is breaking hearts, weeping all alone and refusing to let anyone near."

The woman surrendered to her tears, while Johannes stood frozen in a hollow daze. Only this morning, his mind had been a hive of hopeful thoughts, nursing the quiet expectation that they might finish their conversation tonight.
But all of that had vanished. The friend of yesterday—driven by the desperate need for a crust of bread—had himself become bread for the beasts, a fleeting meal for the scavengers of the earth and sky. He had slipped into the cold shroud of the past before Johannes could even savor his presence in the present.

Johannes exhaled a ragged breath, the memory of the Deacon's hunger-wracked body from the night before twisting like a knife in his gut. "He died hungry, too," he muttered, the words tasting of bile and defeat. "Was he supposed to pity the little ones? Is this truly what pleases God?"

In the suffocating dark of his loneliness, haunted by the echoes of his departed companion, his feet dragged him toward that wretched child. The boy was huddled in the corner, clutching his

bruised frame in a vain attempt to hold the pain of the beating at bay. He trembled violently, his voice a mere rasp, hollowed out by despair and impotence. Around him, the women offered soft, frantic comforts, but the boy remained unreachable, a ghost still tethered to a broken body.

Johannes stood over him, the memory of the kick he'd once delivered flickering like a phantom pain. He exhaled sharply, a ragged sound as he wrestled with his own spirit to honor a vow made to God.
At last, his feet moved. His face was a battlefield of warring impulses, and as he drew near, a woman scurried away, frightened by the sheer heat of his suppressed rage. For a full minute, he simply loomed there—a pillar of a man who refused to bend.Then, the pillar broke.

He dropped into a crouch. His hand trembled, a violent struggle within his own muscles, as he reached out to shake the boy. He bit his lip so hard it bled, the sympathetic ghost of Catherina rising in his mind's eye. Internally, he spat upon this weakness, terrified of the rot of pity seeping into his veins.

But as his palm touched the boy's back, the child spun around and threw himself into Johannes's arms. "Father..." he sobbed, his voice a frail reed. "I'm dying of hunger!"
The boy clung to his shirt with a desperate, white-knuckled grip, pouring his agony into a bloody embrace.
Johannes's features contorted, hovering on the verge of an explosion of pure revulsion. In the hollow of his ear, Jonathas' old mockery rang out: *A duck embracing pig's filth!*

Johannes's face flushed a deep, suffocating crimson. He wanted to bolt, to vanish, to hide from his own skin. His hands moved to tear the boy away, but the child's grip held fast."Let me stay here a moment," the boy whispered with a terrifying innocence. "God is going to take me to Heaven, just like he took Junior."
Johannes stiffened, a sharp breath escaping him. *Fine,* he thought bitterly. *At least it's dark. No one will tell Jonathas.* He sank to his knees, adjusting to the alien weight of the child in his arms, his breathing shallow and jagged.

"I smell food..." the boy whispered again, his voice tugging at Johannes's threadbare coat. "Please... I'm so hungry... please."
A jolt went through Johannes. He remembered the scrap of meat he'd pilfered when the Chief wasn't looking. The moment he produced it, the boy pounced with such ferocity he nearly took Johannes's fingers with it. Johannes shook his hand out, sighing in irritation, but the boy's muffled voice broke through his resentment.
"When I meet God in Heaven, I'll tell Him you helped me. He'll help you back. I'm sure of it."
Johannes fell silent. He tried to anchor his fraying nerves with the weight of faith.

Eventually, the din of the pen faded into the heavy silence of sleep. Johannes remained, exhausted, trapped by a boy who drugged his cruelty with whispers of the Divine. For two days, he had carried the weight of his promise; now, it felt like lead.

After an agonizing struggle, he finally persuaded the boy to lie down. As Johannes settled into his own uneasy rest, his gaze

lingered on the huddled, shivering form.
He loves God, even though God delivered him to this hell, Johannes mused. *But why am I surprised? I don't seek revenge on Jonathas. I would take him back in a heartbeat, even as he breaks me. Because...* He lowered his head, the truth bitter on his tongue. *Because I remember the grace he showed me long before the torture began.*
He looked at the child with a cynical twist of his lips. *Jonathas would go mad if he knew he is ushering so many souls into Heaven.*

Morning came with a violent tremor. The boy was shaking him, voice thin with terror. "Uncle, wake up! The Driver is here!"
Johannes bolted upright, his eyes bleary and stinging. The Driver stood there, a grim shadow waiting for him to rise. As Johannes stood, he felt those small, cold hands seize his legs. He could feel the child's fear vibrating through his own bones.
Panic flared. If he were seen like this, word would reach Jonathas. He tried to shake the boy off, but the child, sensing the shift, whispered the only "password" he knew:
"I want to tell *Him* you were kind to me!"

Johannes froze, the memory of his vow catching in his throat. But the Driver's voice cut through the air like a lash. "Looks like it was more than *just* a sandwich, eh?"

The blood turned to ice in Johannes's veins. Pride, sharp and jagged, made the choice for him. He snatched the boy up and hurled him toward the Driver with a guttural roar. "You gossip instead of doing your job?!"

The Driver reacted purely on instinct. He grabbed the boy's arm with such force that the sickening *pop* of a dislocated shoulder echoed in the room. He threw the child to the floor and beat him until the screams stopped. When he finally stepped back, the boy opened his eyes one last time. He fixed Johannes with a strange, haunting gaze—a look that froze into eternity.

The arrow of that stare pierced Johannes's heart. A cold shudder racked him as he remembered the boy's promise to speak to God. He looked down, his face twisted in a grimace. It was over. Everything between him and the Heavens was severed.
"He won't bother you again, sir," the Driver said casually. "Come, have your breakfast."

The man stepped closer, but Johannes looked up with eyes that were utterly vacant. The Driver faltered, his smirk dying as he met that hollow stare. He began to back away, sensing the storm.
The dam broke. Johannes lunged. He threw himself at the man with a feral, soul-deep bitterness, his fingers clawing for the throat. He fought to stifle the man, to turn him into a sacrificial lamb for his own broken vow.

The Driver screamed for help. His fellows swarmed, a sea of hands dragging Johannes away. When they finally pried him off, the Driver stood coughing, and Johannes slumped, defeated. He realized then that he had become the very thing he feared they would see.

He spent the day bound to a chair, his soul feeling as though it might burst from his chest. He had broken his word. He had shattered his image in Jonathas' eyes. One look from a dying boy

had been enough to make him crush his own pride with his bare hands.

His body recoiled from the open sky. When the Chief of Drivers finally returned, Johannes's heart hammered against his ribs like a trapped bird. The Chief approached, brow furrowed.
"I don't think you've guessed the verdict," the Chief muttered. Johannes remained motionless. "He's merely changing your post. You're to be a slave driver now. Put that pathetic pity aside and think of yourself."
Johannes's lip curled in profound disgust.

"You'll get better food," the Chief snapped, irritated. "A bed. Clothes. What could possibly make you look so revolted? Look at the miserable state you've been in these last three months!"

Johannes's eyes blazed with a silent, scorching fire. The Chief took a breath, forcing himself back to a calm, professional tone. "I meant... I'm glad you're leaving this squalor behind, sir. Come, let me undo these ties so you can wash. We need to start treating that scabies."

As the ropes fell away, Johannes remained limp in the chair, making no move to rise. The Chief sighed, hovering for a moment as if trying to diagnose the malaise. He placed a hand on Johannes's shoulder.
"Your pity for them," the Chief said softly, "only adds one more to the tally of the tormented."

In that moment, the words struck Johannes like a physical blow. They were his own words—the same indifferent logic he had used

to convince Catherina to hang Elisabetha. He gasped. Finally, he understood that Catherina's terror hadn't been of the helpless corpse; a glacial chill swept through him. He sat there, trembling, trying to hide his soul from the piercing gaze of the *One* in the clouds.

Chapter Seven:

Beside the Leader

Johannes collapsed onto his cot in the drivers' hut, his frame vibrating with a cold, jagged fury. It was the same bed where he had spent five days of convalescence, yet the four days that followed had returned him here with a heart unrecognizable to the man who had left.

In those few days, he had been battered by the deaths of nearly forty souls whose agony he had shared. He had looked into faces—four distinct lives—and felt their features blur into memory before he could even learn them. He had somehow forged a kinship with the captive villagers, feeling their grime beneath his own skin. And then, with some words, he was commanded to cast it all into the abyss and join the ranks of their butchers.

He buried his head beneath the thin blanket, pressing his fingers into his ears to drown out the gales of laughter erupting from the next room. There, his new "brothers" gathered around grease-stained tables, drinking and playing cards with a chilling indifference, as if their cruelty toward their own kin—those starving shadows just a wall away—was an act of mercy rather than tyranny.

He dreaded sleep, for it would only hasten the dawn; yet he loathed wakefulness, which left him to sear in the heat of his own roiling emotions. He writhed between these two hells until the inevitable guest arrived: the morning.

The dawn revealed a different Johannes. The pallor of the pits was gone, hidden behind a scrubbed, white face and a crisp uniform. The stench of bitter sweat and the marks of toil had been erased. Yet, for all his fine attire, he lacked the courage to look at the sky.

The Chief driver's voice, thick and grating, splintered the dawn silence. "I trust you won't show a flicker of pity or a grain of tolerance. Bear in mind: these are cattle, not humans."
Johannes's expression remained a mask of stone. "I should point out," he replied hollowly, "that we treat cattle with far more dignity than we do our own flesh and blood."

The Chief shrugged. "Perhaps. But if you soften for one of them, he'll start thinking he's back in his mother's parlor. Listen to a man of experience—I've spent ten years at the head of this work. I know whereof I speak." He paused, his eyes narrowing. "Remember the Leader's laws. You want your status back, don't you?"

As the Chief walked away, the slaves began their frantic, rhythmic trek into the mine. Johannes bowed his head. For the first time, he stood at the front, watching the procession he used to be in its rear. He felt the sickening weight of his full stomach, a phantom of the morning meal he had just consumed.
He cracked his whip, his own skin crawling at the sound. He watched them haul the coal, his own back aching with the memory of its weight. He stood rooted, his legs twitching with the urge to join the labor. To endure it, he distracted himself by noticing the way they use their picks, remaining shrouded in a

tomb-like silence so none would recognize his voice or realize the magnitude of his betrayal.

At dinner, Johannes sat at the head of the table. The other drivers fell upon their food like scavengers, while Johannes barely touched his plate, his eyes telling a story of a soul in constriction.
"You did well today," the Chief said from his right. "You aren't nearly as soft-hearted as we feared yesterday."
Johannes said nothing. Another man chimed in, "I told you—hunger makes men do strange things!"
"Aye," a third mocked, "but Alex is the one who paid the price for Vilmos's hunger."
Alex rubbed his throat, grimacing. "It still stings today."

A collective laugh erupted, only to be severed by the thunderous crash of Johannes's palms hitting the table. He stood, his eyes casting sparks of pure malice. He stormed toward the sleeping quarters, the door slamming behind him like a gunshot.
"I was trying to change the way he saw himself, you fools!" the Chief hissed. "And you start braying like donkeys the moment he sits down?"
Before they could respond, Johannes burst back in. He snatched his whip from the peg, his voice a low growl. "You all owe me a lashing, and I intend to tear every stripe of it from your hides right now!"

The men froze. The Chief recoiled from his chair. "I never laid a finger on you, sir!"
"We were only following orders!" another cried, scrambling up. "You know that we—"

The whip cut him short. Johannes descended upon them, a whirlwind of repressed hatred, lashing and striking until his thirst for vengeance was sated. He moved to the next, then to Alex, pouring out a volcano of rage. One by one, he made them taste the gall they had forced down his throat for months.

An hour later, the room was silent save for the ragged breathing of the broken. One by one, the drivers dragged themselves to their beds. The food remained on the table, a grim centerpiece for a bloody supper. Johannes stood panting, staring at the ruin he had wrought.

"I believe that was necessary," the driver whispered from behind.
Johannes turned to him, his face looking almost diabolical. "I hate you all!"
The Chief remained unshaken. "And now your heart is empty of its bile, sir. Let us begin anew." Johannes glared at him, but the Chief continued, "They didn't resist because they know you **are** their **master**. We have treated you with **respect** from the start, as I'm sure you've noticed."

Johannes let out a sharp, jagged huff of breath.
"We all long for your restoration, sir," the Heaf added. "We are your men. Our honor is tied to yours."
The last thing Johannes heard as he closed his door was: "We'll be waiting for you at the card table tomorrow!"

That night was a burning quiet. Johannes tossed in his bed, his mind a labyrinth. The Chief driver was a serpent of wisdom; he had orchestrated this entire play, ensuring Johannes would feel

"justified" in his revenge to reclaim his shattered pride.

But as the hours passed by, the haunting stare of that little boy followed him into the dark. Unable to escape his own reflection, Johannes fell to his knees to pray. His chest felt heavier than a ton of coal. He remained prostrate for a long time, apologizing to God, insisting that the boy's death was a mere "oversight"—a slip of the hand—and that he simply needed time to learn how to loathe cruelty. He emptied his feverish justifications onto the floor until he went numb.

In the months that followed, the Johannes who spent his nights drinking with the murderers of his friends was not the same Johannes who had found faith with the Deacon. Neither was he the Johannes who had married Catherina, nor the profligate Johannes who had once toyed with suicide.
Jonathas was molding him, rolling him like dough between manipulative fingers. Yet it rankled Jonathas to know that a son, even if he is your mirror image, is never truly *you*.

Three months passed—comfortable months, compared to the agony of the pits. One afternoon, Johannes walked in to rest when the Chief driver met him with a smile so wide it gave Johannes pause.
"You look as though you're holding a secret," Johannes said, his pulse quickening.
The Chief rubbed his nose, teasing Johannes's patience. "What will you give me if I tell you?"
Johannes's face lit up. "Is it... is it *the* news?"
The Chief let out a short laugh. "Go on then—convince him to let

you stay with us!"

Johannes threw his whip into the air, a burst of genuine laughter escaping his throat. Finally! He was leaving the valley. Catherina's flight had cost him six grueling months of his life, but he had survived. At least, he thought, he hadn't become in her shoes—not entirely.

Immediately, Johannes washed his face, shaved his beard, and began his ascent from the valley. He ran without a backward glance, folding away a dark chapter of his wounded pride. His boots struck the very same stones he had descended six months prior—back when he had walked down into the shadows of his own shame.

He met the main doors with a firm chest, casting his gaze toward the heavens before the building itself. "Lord," he whispered to his soul, "this time, I enter as a man different from the Johannes You once knew."
Johannes stepped inside with a newfound gravity, his head held high, indifferent to the prying eyes of the onlookers. He requested an audience with the Leader and waited, enduring the guards' suspicious scrutiny. Finally, he entered and sank to one knee before Jonathas, who remarked with biting sarcasm:
"Look, Julia, see who has come to visit me. Where have you been all these days? You've been gone so long, I've nearly forgotten... what was your name again?"
Jonathas chuckled softly, then shifted into a chillingly serious tone. "Do you know why I summoned you?"
"No, sir."
"I simply wanted to share some joyous news. Yesterday, my men

abducted five women. Guess **who** was among them?"
Johannes hesitated for a heartbeat. "I have no idea... but it certainly wasn't Catherina."
Jonathas' mocking laughter died instantly. "And why 'certainly'?"
"Because if she were here, you would have preferred to shatter me with the sight of her in a state I'd despise, rather than opening with mere words."
Jonathas fell silent for a moment, then whispered as if comforting himself, "Well, I suppose I cannot expect my own son to be a fool."

The words hit Johannes like a bucket of ice water. His heart hammered against his ribs as the truth he had long suspected finally dawned. Catherina had been right all along, though he had rejected her observations at the time. This was the first time the Leader had ever acknowledged him—calling him *son*.

"Your son, Father? It seems you've missed him dearly!" Julia interjected, her voice dripping with irony.
Jonathas turned a cold, mocking gaze toward her. "The fact that you are stout and he is not doesn't change the fact that he is your brother, you simpleton!"
Stunned, Julia looked at Johannes. "He doesn't look shocked! Am I the only one who was kept out of the loop?"
"No," Jonathas countered, "you are simply the only one out of your mind." He turned back to Johannes. "Your *final* words to me that day rang in my ears until I finally realized what you *meant*. And for that..."

Johannes bowed his head until it nearly touched the floor. "I

thank you for deigning to forgive me, my Lord and my Father. I realized my error against you that very first night. I swear, I shall never betray your trust again."

A heavy silence lingered before Jonathas took a deep breath and smiled deviously. "Indeed, I deserve every ounce of gratitude, for I always honor Myself." His voice suddenly thundered with rage. "But 'never betray my trust again'? Who was it that exploited the absence of my eyes to feed the slaves? And that mongrel dog?"
He leaned in. "If I asked you now why you did it, you'd simply say: 'I pitied them.' As if you went to the valley to loiter, rather than to learn where pity leads you."

Johannes answered with submission "I have learned it through hardship. Pity is like wine; it addles the mind and is often difficult to quit." He shifted his tone. "But I promised to put your will above it. This grueling experience taught me that I owe everything to you. You are my pride and my dignity. Without you, I am nothing."

Jonathas' expression softened into a satisfied smirk. He turned to Julia. "Those *words* you just heard took three months of agonizing thought to produce."
Johannes smiled, remembering the long days he spent rehearsing that very speech. But Jonathas cut the moment short: "Stand up!"
Johannes rose, his gaze still humble and lowered. Julia stared at him, her frustration boiling over. "And how did it even occur to you to doubt that you were Jacobus's son?"
Johannes paused to gauge the room, then replied, "To be honest... it was Catherina."

Jonathas raised his eyebrows, narrowing his eyes in genuine admiration. "That devil of a woman!"
"No!" Julia cried out. "A woman figured it out while I sat here blind! Damn it all!"
Jonathas sounded almost amused "This is why I have walked against the grain of society since I was a boy. I realized that all the laws around me were mere *illusions* living in my head, having nothing to do with reality."
Julia crossed her arms, biting her lip. "Why did you both lie to us in the first place?"

"It was merely a *gift* for the sterile Jacobus," Jonathas laughed. "But, truth be told, I took the gift back after seven years." His face darkened. "Yet you carried your grandfather's name because of him."

Julia grabbed her father's arm coquettishly. "And what would *you* have named him?"
Jonathas shrugged with total indifference. "I didn't care. I never intended to *keep* him." He shot a wicked look at Johannes. "You are lucky I am so fond of *My* own face."

Johannes recoiled. It flashed through his mind that when Jonathas kicked him in the face, he was trying to erase those features—to make it easier to kill him. He was haunted by the realization that he had survived all these years only because of the resemblance he had grown to hate. Jonathas smiled, reading his thoughts, until Julia's choked voice broke the silence.
"It's true. You look nothing like Jacobus. I see my father's face in yours... Curse it, I won't accept you as a brother!"

"Perhaps," Jonathas said, rising to his feet, "you will accept him as a master instead."

The statement left both Johannes and Julia speechless. The Leader turned his piercing eyes to Johannes. "Your boundaries are the limits of this building. You have no authority. And know this: any act of pity will cost you your allowance at the very least."

Johannes hurried to kiss his father's feet in gratitude for his reinstatement. Julia, desperate for clarity, asked, "What am I supposed to *understand* from what you just told me?"

Jonathas spared her only a sharp glance before walking out, ignoring her. She stomped the floor with a heavy sigh and turned on Johannes, her face dripping with spite. "What else are you hiding?"
Johannes struggled to compose himself. "I was in the valley. I've only just returned. You're the one who should tell me what happened in my absence."

Julia sighed, her eyes narrowing. "Is it enough for you to know that Jonathas is... unwell?"
Shock erupted across Johannes's face. "Unwell? He looks fine!"
"He is *trying* to look fine. None of the men must know; the vultures are circling."
Johannes looked down, his voice heavy. "This is staggering. Now I understand why he forgave me so easily, so unlike him. Has the doctor failed?"
"Yes. In fact, he told him the illness will take him within a few months."

Johannes's eyes widened, his palm flying to his face. "I always thought of his death, but now that it's a reality... I want to run from it."
"So do I," Julia whispered.

Johannes returned to his old room. Entering, he remembered the ill-fated day he had left it, never imagining the destiny that awaited him. Now, he returned under the weight of a monumental shock. He had always viewed life through the lens of Jonathas; even his belief in God had been sparked by Jonathas' shadow. What vacuum would his absence leave? Could he even function without him?

He opened the window and gazed down at the path where he used to carry coal. He remembered stealing glances at this very window, dreaming of the day he would return. Now he was back, but his heart bore a hundred scars. Nothing was as it seemed when he had looked at it through his youthful arrogance. The past months had shown him life from a sharp, jagged angle he once thought beneath his dignity.

As night fell, the silence of the room grew heavy. He hurriedly lit a lamp, terrified that the darkness would remind him of the gloom of the pen—of the ghosts lingering there, drinking their own tears to endure the fire of oppression.

Suddenly, Johannes fell on his face, muttering: "Jacobus's affection and Jonathas' face; I searched for You to *protect* me While **I** Was *in* your protection!" Johannes smiled gratefully "You are not only the strongest, You Are My Real 'Father'. Johannes

raised his head: But my question is, why *should* you create me from this **particular** man?

Restless thoughts hammered at his mind until his patience snapped. He strode toward Jonathas' chambers. Upon entering, he saw a beautiful servant kneeling, tending to Jonathas' nails. The air was thick with the scent of luxury, and the room was filled with the finest furniture he had ever seen. Ten lamps blazed, turning night into day. To Johannes, this familiar scene now felt strangely hollow and grotesque.

After several minutes of silently comparing this opulence to the misery of the valley, Jonathas finally looked up, leaning on his fist.
"This time, your visit is truly a surprise."
"I've wanted to see you for six months," Johannes said. "A few minutes today wasn't enough."
"Hmm," Jonathas mocked. "Has it really been *six* months? It felt like six days to me. All drinking, playing, lounging..." he yawned, "...and sleeping."

Johannes hardened his features, realizing that his resemblance to his father was his only weapon. "Strange. A man even misses being stung."
They locked eyes before Jonathas gestured for the servant to leave. He turned to Johannes with a smirk. "It seems you **enjoyed** the toil down there. Your muscles have grown, your features have sharpened. I could *almost* call you a man now."

He laughed, leaning back. "I was younger than you when I began the struggle to get here."

"Tell me, was that whole affair not an act of revenge?"
"It was," Jonathas explained. "Revenge *against* your excessive weakness. I hoped you would understand that life belongs to the **strong**." He sighed. "But I finally gave up on you. That is why I brought you back—after I learned the slaves were making a habit of falling at your feet 'for *some* reason'."

He cast a razor-sharp look at his son, whose face went pale. "So, you told me you'd choose my obedience over pity, didn't you?"
Flushed with embarrassment, Johannes's voice cracked. "Forgive me... but the *condition* you put me in made me realize the logic that the food we received was not worth the labor we gave."
Jonathas exploded. "**Of course it isn't worth it!** I want to suck the life out of them until they die so I can replace them *periodically*, you idiot!"
Johannes's expression went cold. His father regained his composure. "You were supposed to learn how to defend *your* own life, not the lives of others."

Johannes wiped sweat from his brow. "Fine. I admit my outlook has changed fundamentally. I am not the same man who left. But don't you think you exaggerated the 'lesson' just a little?"
A muffled laugh escaped Jonathas' throat, baring his teeth. "That part? That was what Catherina D**id** to you. Tell me, do you still **Love** her, my child?"

Grief flickered in Johannes's eyes as he looked away with a sigh.
Jonathas laced his fingers together. "Let me guess... that look in your eye and this midnight visit mean Julia told you?"
"Yes."
Jonathas stretched out his legs, watching them tremble slightly.

"All my life, I was careful not to let my son kill me as I killed my father. And now, I find I am dying at the same age as my father *without* anyone having to lift a finger. That is *why* I drowned you in debauchery—to keep you weak and harmless."

Jonathas studied Johannes's face before adding quietly, "And now... it is too late. You are emotional, ignorant, and dependent. I have only a few months to fix what I did, and I will fail."
Johannes remained stoic. His father continued, "I won't succeed. But *you* can. It is your choice. Just as I decided my path, you can decide yours. But you cannot replace me in a few months, no matter what. You have only just reached the point of poverty from which **I** began.
If I closed my eyes now, I would be handing you over to them as either a slave or a sacrifice."

Johannes took a deep breath and smiled. "I thank you for doing this to me!"
Jonathas' eyes searched his for meaning as Johannes looked away. "Now I know that I can leave this place without feeling like I've lost a thing."
Jonathas' smile was perceptive. "You believe in God, don't you?"
The sudden shift caught Johannes off guard. He stumbled over his words, his face a mask of confusion. Jonathas burst into laughter. "You aren't talking to a fool. Believe it or not, your eyes told me!"

Johannes had rehearsed this confrontation a thousand times, yet in the moment, he was paralyzed. His father actually encouraged him. "Don't hesitate! Express your convictions with strength, whatever they are."

Johannes stared in disbelief. Jonathas replied, "Your life belongs to you. If you want to put a God in your world, you are free to do so. Live in whatever way makes you happy."

Jonathas leaned back, gazing into the distance. "As for me, I tried to taste every truth. I surrounded myself with *everything* that brings joy. I lived as a *king*, while my fathers died as *miserable peasants.*"
"Now it's your turn. Do you want to be a *slave* like your ancestors? If that weren't the easiest path, everyone wouldn't be doing it!"

He laughed mockingly. Johannes finally raised his head, his voice trembling despite himself. "You have owned me my entire life. For twenty-two years, you were my master, doing with me as you pleased. So... may I ask you to listen to me during these final days of your life?"

Jonathas crossed his legs, his eyes dancing with dark mirth. "Johannes, you madman! Don't you see what I've done? I have thrived in defying God *every* second of my life! I relished it! I boasted of it! If I saw Christ himself standing before me, I would hasten to kill him!"

"But even if you killed Christ," Johannes countered, "it would Not save you from the One who never dies!"
Jonathas placed his thumb and forefinger against his mocking lips. "Haha! Why do you insist on making yourself a laughingstock? I told you: believe what you wish. As for me, I have drunk my happiness to the dregs. You do with yours as you

please."

Jonathas stood up and stretched. "When you wish to be ridiculous, do not argue with the *wise*—not for any reason other than to keep them from ruining your moment."
Jonathas scrutinized the room with sharp eyes before turning on his heel. "For your information," he said, "I am barely holding my tongue. Go to sleep and save your mood while you can."

Gathering his resolve, Johannes spoke with a sudden, daring edge: "Do you know who is really going to kill you? It is 'Jonathas.' Yes, *you* are the one who made the Lord sentence you to death at the *same* age your father was when you murdered him!"
Jonathas turned back, his face twisted in a mocking sneer.
"Ha! So you've joined the cult of 'God-of-Coincidences' too? Wait until my death is certain before you start gloating. How would you feel if, for some reason, I didn't die? How would you explain your 'divine justice' then?"
He chuckled softly at his son's bewildered expression, then added:
"Do you know why you are so shaken? It's not just fear—it's ignorance. I'll take this moment to teach you a piece of wisdom: never defend a thing until you have fully grasped it. You have put your faith in a religion you know nothing about."

"No," Johannes defended himself, "I have learned, and—"
"Have you been baptized?" Jonathas cut him off.
Johannes recoiled, his breath catching. "What do you mean?"

Jonathas smiled with pure condescension. "See? Baptism is the very first step of becoming a Christian. My own father baptized

me; I went to church every Sunday. Even your peasant grandfather could best you in a debate, so what chance do you have against a man who has been a profligate for forty years?"

Johannes lowered his head in embarrassment. His father spread his arms wide. "And yet, I have *no* desire to defeat you with words. I am opening the door for you; go and learn, and understand for yourself.
Guess what? Tomorrow is Sunday. Go early to the Church of Mervian and attend the Mass."

"And does this church believe that Christ is a Teacher, and *not* the Lord Himself?"
Jonathas shrugged in disgust. "What are you talking about, Johannes? No such church exists. The Lord, the Christ, and the Holy Spirit—the three are one. That is the Holy Trinity."

Johannes raised his gaze. "A deacon once told me there are Christians who believe Christ is a messenger from the Lord, and —"
Jonathas' brow arched with suspicion. "And *where* did you find this strange deacon?"
"He was a slave in the mine. But he died."
Jonathas smiled bitterly. "Do not listen to such heresy, or you'll lose your faith entirely! Regardless, go and search. Perhaps someone has made up a *new* story!"

Jonathas opened the inner door to his bedchamber, yawning.
"When you find yourself ready, come to me and we shall debate. Don't forget, I'm waiting for you!" His voice echoed from within the room: "Even if I am busy torturing some *bishop*, I'll finish up

and come at once!"

A crude laugh followed, and the guard slammed the door, leaving Johannes boiling with self-fury. He had squandered the opportunity to argue because of the fear that had tied his tongue. He couldn't even explain what it was he believed in. How could he rid himself of the looming shadow of Jonathas—a shadow that had grown in his heart since the terrors of his childhood? It was a question to which he had no answer.

Johannes walked aimlessly, his mind spinning in cycles. Eventually, he entered his room to find it glowing with candlelight. A lavish dinner awaited him on the table, and a beautiful maid greeted him. He stared at it all, surprised, feeling a sharp pang of nostalgia for a time when this was the only life he knew.

He sat, the savory aroma of meat filling his senses, but contrasting images flickered in his mind. A shiver ran down his spine as he remembered that horrific final night in the life of the starving deacon. He exhaled and reached for the food, shaking off his conscience—a conscience that insisted on conjuring images of the hungry souls he had been forced to lash every morning.

With a heart wrung with shame—having frequntly broken his promise to the Lord over the past three months—he tightened his grip on his spoon. His gaze fixed on the bag of coal beside the fireplace, he whispered: "For the sake of that promise, I must convince Jonathas; perhaps he will let me regain the Lord's trust in me. In truth, there is no one but the Lord to deter him”

Johannes spent a long night in deep reflection before setting out at dawn. He rode his horse through the mountain passes toward Mervian, determined on two fronts: first, to learn so that Jonathas would have no leverage over him; and second, to sit with Jonathas in the evening to study his mind and slowly dismantle his childhood phobia.

"The only promising thing is that Jonathas does not refuse a debate," he thought as he entered the church. A large crucifix greeted him, and he approached it, studying the details of the carved figure, trying to discern the features of the man who had changed the world.
After a while, the priest entered, raising his hand to greet the congregation in an incomprehensible tongue. The people responded in kind. Johannes took a seat, observing this environment that was so foreign to him.

The priest held a decorated book, speaking words Johannes could not understand. When the congregation stood, Johannes stood with them to see, but eventually sat back down out of boredom. He looked at the ornate decorations. "Do all these people understand what he’s saying? This is the first time I’ve heard someone speak in another language."

He watched the ritual, finally finding something he understood during the sermon, which reminded him of the deacon’s words. When he saw the crowd moving forward to receive a small piece of bread with intense solemnity, he reached out his hand like the others. But the priest’s piercing, scrutinizing gaze made him pull back; he didn't understand why a piece of bread required such

profound awe.

Suddenly, the walls of the church shook with a massive sound he had never heard before—the organ. Johannes felt the echo of the music vibrating in his chest. Then the choir's voices rose in a melody that surprised him; it was nothing like the instruments or the tavern songs he knew. He froze, watching the choir, trying desperately—and failing—to catch a single intelligible word.

At the end, he stood by the exit, whispering to himself: "Either the priest explains this to me with full conviction, or Jonathas will do it with full mockery."
He turned back to the priest and spent over two hours listening as the man explained everything from scratch. The priest suggested baptizing him, but Johannes refused. Finally, he left the church, walked a few paces, then turned back to look at the building from a distance and burst into uncontrollable laughter. When the stares of passersby began to prick at him, he composed himself, took his horse, and rode home, his face flushed and a smile on his lips.

When Jonathas saw him at the drinking session, he smirked with his usual irony "Welcome, Saint Johannes the Baptist!"
Johannes smiled. "Does attending a single Mass make me a high saint?!"

"Did you not 'bite' Christ? The Holy Spirit is with you now!"
Johannes replied with disapproval, "They didn't give me the bread because I am *not* baptized. But do they **truly** believe the bread becomes a *part* of Christ?"

Jonathas roared with laughter. "And did you try dancing to the rhythm of the organ pipes?"
Johannes frowned. "Forget the organ... I just wish I had understood a *single* word!"

Jonathas waved a hand dismissively. "Ah, I forgot not everyone understands Latin. I neglected to mention that yesterday."
He extended his hand, and Johannes leaned in to kiss it as was custom. Jonathas gripped the front of Johannes's head, gloating with a look of victory.
"See? If I had debated you yesterday, what a *fool* you would have been!"
"I admit it," Johannes said. "But if Christ is not **merely** a Teacher, then I will not believe in him, sir."

The following day, Johannes rode between village churches, searching for a church believes in the human nature of Christ, but his efforts were in vain. At sunset, he was returning slowly on his horse when he passed the Montis-Ferrus junction. He stopped, remembering the night he had gambled with his fate, his soul filled with terror. Now, it was all over.

"I wonder where you are, Kati?" he murmured with a smile. "What would you say if you knew I had turned to religion?"
Memories of that night flooded back until he reached a thought that made him jump. He spurred his horse; the animal reared and bolted, and he barely managed to direct it toward Pratus, his spirits soaring. The road that had exhausted him while running months ago seemed like nothing beneath the horse's hooves.

He reached the trees as the sun dipped below the horizon. He dismounted and took the same path Wilius had taken when he slipped away that night. There, he found children running between the houses. Within seconds, they stopped, staring at the stranger.
"Do you know where I can find a man named Wilius?"
"That old man! Over here!"

The boys led him to a dilapidated house. Johannes stared at the decaying door before reaching out to knock. At the first touch, it creaked wide open, revealing an empty house.
He stepped inside to explore, his boots leaving prints in the thick layer of dust.
In the other room, he found a man lying in bed like a dying soul. He approached, trying to recognize the sleeping face, only to realize that on that dark night, he hadn't actually seen Wilius' features clearly. He had no choice but to call out: "Wilius!"

The man's withered eyes snapped open. "Who are you?"
"Are you Wilius?"
"Yes... and who are you?"
Wilius pulled himself up to a sitting position, leaning against a pillow, as Johannes answered: "I am the young man you spoke to about your religion when he was about to end it all... by the trees."

Wilius rubbed his face. "Ah, yes... I remember you. So this is your face! You... you look like... Vilmos the Leader... yes, him!"
Johannes replied, startled, "So you know my father!"
Wilius rubbed his sleepy eyes and said, "I left his gang ten years

ago. Though I have nothing left to lose... I ask that this remains a secret, please."
"Do not worry, I won't tell him. I came to continue our talk about your religion... what was its name?"
"Islam. And the one who follows it is called a Muslim."
"Ah, yes! Did you know I still pray even now?"

Astonishment crossed Wilius' face. "But you haven't learned how to pray; I only showed you the general form."
Johannes's brow furrowed in shock. "What? But doing it that way makes me feel the Lord. What is the mistake?"

Wilius pulled back his covers and moved his legs toward the floor with a heavy effort.
"You didn't seem this old a few months ago," Johannes remarked.
"Yes. Someone poisoned me a year ago, and the poison destroys my body every day, as you can see."
"That is horrific!" Johannes cried. "You look as though you've aged ten or twenty years!"

"That is why I felt distressed seeing you waste your young body. By the way, you have changed too, but for the better; your frame is more masculine, and your words have more strength."
Johannes fell silent, looking aside as he remembered his father's words. Wilius added:
"Would you bring the water closer, please?"

Johannes hesitated, then moved slowly to bring over a large basin with a water jug. Wilius gripped the jug. "This is what you must do before you pray."

Wilius began cleaning his mouth and nose, washing his face and hands, wiping his head, and finally washing his feet.
"It’s called 'Wudu'. The point is to wash yourself clean after you've relieved yourself."

Johannes stared at the water with a heavy gloom. "Is this holy water? Is there anointing oil?"
"No," Wilius replied simply. "It is water from the river. Any clean water will do."
Johannes shrugged his shoulders. "I’ve prayed many times before, and I never did this."
"Before, you were merely trying to pray. Now, I will teach you how to *actually* pray."

"Wait a moment," Johannes interjected, his voice hardening with caution. "I won't enter your religion *until* I know everything about it—until I am certain! Do you have a church?"
Wilius' gaunt features sank. "I see. I thought you were asking me to teach you the prayer... No, Muslims have a 'Mosque,' not a church. And of course, there isn't one to be found here."

Wilius paused for a heartbeat before adding, "But I can tell you this: any room where a group gathers to pray can be called a Mosque."
Johannes scratched his head, trying to twist the images of churches in his mind to fit this new concept. "Do you do nothing in this Mosque but pray?"

"The leader of the prayer might give a short sermon, urging the people toward faith and doing good deeds."
Johannes rubbed his eyes and sat on a nearby crate, asking his

question for the tenth time that day: "Before we pray, explain the foundation to me. Do you believe that Christ is just a human teacher?"

"Of course," Wilius replied. "But he was not the last. Because Christ's message grew old over time, Allah sent a new Messenger to renew the path, to remove the errors that had crept in, and to make the truth easy to find once more."

Johannes's face lit up at the word "of course"—the very word he had been waiting for all day. He leaned forward, buzzing with excitement. "What do you mean by 'Allah'? And where is this Messenger? Is he alive?"
"Allah is God, the Creator, in our tongue. As for the Messenger... he passed away. Over a thousand years ago."

Johannes clapped his hands together, his voice rising in sharp annoyance. "A thousand years? And you call him a *new* messenger?!"
"But Christ's message is over *two* thousand years old!"
Johannes smirked sarcastically. "Aha, I see. So a thousand years qualifies as 'new' in your book!"
Wilius let out a soft laugh. "You remind me of myself when I used to mock my servant as he answered me... only to be left speechless like a fool in the end."
Johannes lunged at the opportunity. "That is exactly what I need! Something to leave others speechless!" He followed it with a bashful laugh. "Fine. I'll stop the mockery. I will listen, and only then will I judge."

Wilius took a breath, smiling. "'So yeah, Islam' is an Arabic word. It means to 'submit' yourself and all your affairs to God alone, believing there is no deity but Him..."
"That," Johannes interrupted enthusiastically, "is the *only* thing I am already certain of!"
"The second pillar," Wilius continued, "is to believe He sent Messengers to guide humanity."
"I have no problem with that."
"Among these Messengers are Moses, Jesus the Christ, and Muhammad..."
Johannes pointed a finger. "I only know Christ, and I am happy for him to be a Messenger."

"Yeah, Moses was the Messenger of Judaism..."
Johannes's expression shifted into high alert. "I've heard of that religion. What do they believe?"
"Whatever they believe, they do not welcome newcomers. We call it an ethnic religion."
Johannes's face relaxed. "Let us leave them be, then. That leaves the final Messenger?"
"Yes. The Messenger of Islam: Muhammad."

Thus, Johannes continued to interrupt Wilius as he recounted the story of the Prophet 'Muhammad.' The criminal within him sought to criticize it, just as he had criticized the story of Christ, driven by an eagerness to find a myth that would confirm his intuition in debunking religious narratives and validate his own convictions.
The specter of his desires yearned deep within for what Jonathas had taught him throughout his life; he was terrified of being forced to change his accustomed lifestyle. Yet, it was the very

dominance of Jonathan that had originally forged within his heart the opposing force to embrace his passion for seeking the truly powerful.
By midnight, Johannes was riding back to the mountain, his head still spinning. But as he approached his quarters, the blaring sound of instruments jolted him. It was the "Loot Celebration"—the gang's rowdy feast for their latest spoils.
Johannes went pale. He had completely forgotten the party. He tried to slip through the crowd like a shadow, praying desperately that Jonathas hadn't noticed his absence.

But as he raised his eyes toward the Leader, he found Jonathas' gaze fixed on him like a pair of poisoned arrows. Johannes swallowed hard. He took a deep breath, trying to stifle his fear, and slowly waded into the festivities until he almost lost himself in the noise.
As the first light of dawn crept in, the gang members staggered away, drunk and exhausted. Only then did Johannes feel a heavy hand tap his shoulder. One of his father's guards gestured for him to follow.

Johannes approached Jonathas, who was visibly wasted. His body was limp, yet his hand still gripped his chalice with a deathly vice. Jonathas raised his head, his bloodshot eyes boring into Johannes.
"Where the hell were you, you —?! Why are you so late? Did I not command you yesterday to return by nightfall?"
Johannes knelt, his mind racing with the knowledge of how violent Jonathas became when he was drunk.

"Forgive me, sir. I was in Bellavar and lost my way. It took great effort to find the path back; the night was too cloudy."
Johannes bowed his head until it touched the floor, his heart trembling. He knew that a mistake with a drunken Jonathas usually meant being tortured to death. He felt the seconds stretch into an eternity until Jonathas finally spoke.
"You are not to leave your room for a week!"
"As you command! I shall begin my punishment immediately."

Johannes rose cautiously and hurried away, eventually breaking into a run until he slammed his door shut. He panted for a minute before the danger receded and a sense of safety returned. He exhaled his terror into the air and crawled into bed, whispering to himself: "I'm grateful for the prostration. It feeds his ego in a peaceful way."

For the next two days, Johannes paced his room, turning Wilius' words over in his mind, comparing them to the priests and to Jonathas' thoughts. He tried to pray five times a day, though the Arabic words—which he couldn't memorize—stood between him and a full experience. He settled for remembering their meanings, grumbling to himself about how religions were so tied to languages.

On the second night, Jonathas' guard came to fetch him. The moment Johannes walked in, he saw it in his father's eyes: Jonathas was out of his mind again. Johannes cursed the wine under his breath and knelt in anticipation. But Jonathas spoke in a strangely calm voice."Come and sit beside me, Johannes. I want to teach you how to live!"

Johannes swallowed hard and sat beside him, his muscles tensed. He expected Jonathas to sink his claws into him at any moment, and he knew he couldn't resist. But his father calmed him with a mocking tone. "No, don't be afraid! You are here to learn from your Master!"
Jonathas began to boast, regaling Johannes with "wisdom" and lessons from his life of vice. Johannes's pulse slowed; he realized his father was a "happy drunk" tonight. He decided to play the situation to his advantage. He rubbed his chin thoughtfully.

"Magnificent! I am truly in awe of your wisdom and your immense power..."
Jonathas gestured grandly. "Say: Absolute!"
"Yes, your 'absolute' power. And speaking of our recent talks, I was wondering... how were you able to see through the deception of the... the priests and the churches so easily in the beginning?"

Johannes waited, his heart thumping. Jonathas shot him an annoyed look, making Johannes flinch, but then his father's lips curled into a smirk. "Don't say 'see through' it... their deception is as obvious as the sun!"
Johannes breathed a sigh of relief. "Exactly! But other people couldn't see it like *you* did!"
"Of course! Who told you that other people were 'like me' anyway? Even back then, I was *sharper* than them all. I was the *most* skilled at reading, and..."

"And what is 'reading,' sir?"
Jonathas looked at Johannes with utter disdain before breaking into two minutes of hysterical, mad laughter. When he finally

stopped, he attempted to explain "reading" to the patient Johannes in words that cleared up nothing at all.
Jonathas drained the last of his cup and threw it to the floor, the golden vessel clattering loudly. He leaned back, crossing one leg over the other, exhaling the fumes of his intoxication. He began to tell the story of his youth, half-boasting, half-lying:
"I was *brilliant* from the start, more beautiful than the largest gemstone. The priest at the church noticed and told my father I could be a *saint* if I started learning young. My father put me in the seminary, and my skills began to *shine* like the sun!
I learned Latin as if it were my native tongue. I became the fastest reader and the cleverest at inventing convincing interpretations. Everyone envied me—*even* God Himself!

Because I was so sought after and famous at such a young age, my father used to brag about me and seek my blessing. It made me incredibly fond of myself. I believed I was born a saint and didn't need anyone to recognize me as such. And since the 'Holy Spirit' was with me, it would inspire me to perform my own special 'charities'... I alone could 'bless' the young women, and I alone deserved a share of the Lord’s gold, and... and...

But later, I thought simply: if I can convince people of *whatever* I want, even when I know it’s flawed, why shouldn't there be someone else convincing *me* and mocking *me* in return?
That made me hate touching their Holy Book. I believed it was their way of manipulating me through 'Faith'—that broad term that saves you in every dilemma!
One day, I grew tired of being trapped in 'God’s Cage.' I gathered all the alms I could and emptied the 'pockets' of the congregation, and I decided to run. I renounced the religion, tore

off the monk's robes, and set out to enjoy this life.

With My wits, My strong body, and My quick feet, I began taking what I wanted before the owners *even* knew it was gone. I quickly learned that the angry glares of the masses brought a *far* sweeter pleasure than their praise ever did!"

Chapter Eight:

Convince me or I'll eat you!

Three months drifted by. The Leader kept Johannes at his side for the better part of every day, making him witness the cold mechanics of command and the brutal "wisdom" of a predator. He assigned Johannes special missions, hoping these direct lessons would accelerate the boy’s growth and make up for a lifetime of wasted years.

But Johannes lived for his hours of freedom. He would beg his father for a few hours outside the "cage" to ride without a shadow. In those moments, he explored the world as a man of peace, visiting Wilius and the church. He had added a new layer to his plan: he began to listen to the Holy Scriptures, determined to match Jonathas' intellect and anticipate his mocking traps before they could be sprung.

One afternoon, after bidding a final, silent farewell to Wilius' remains, Johannes returned to his room. Death had struck again, claiming his mentor. He stood by the window, staring at the sky as the rhythmic thud of pickaxes echoed from the valley below.
"I won't run away;" he whispered. Wilius was right, I *have* the opportunity to change all this, and perhaps that's *why* Allah created me here in the first place.

He heard the maid enter behind him. He offered a thin smile as she began to pour water for his Wudu. "Tell me, sir," she asked hopefully, "how goes your endeavor?"

"I am nearing the end," Johannes replied. "But as I've told you, it is a single throw of the dice. It may not find its mark."
"I pray the Lord guides your hand and looks upon us with mercy."
"You say that, yet your life is ten times better than the others."
"Yes," she whispered. "In your presence, I find the only light in my life. But that doesn't change the fact that everything else is darkness."

It was a quiet spring day when Jonathas finished his routine of monitoring raids and distributing spoils. He sat sipping a light wine, his nerves frayed by his hidden illness. He watched—with weary eyes—the colorful butterflies that had drifted through the open window. Johannes watched them too, though his mind was miles away.
Then came the moment. Johannes took a deep breath and launched himself into the whirlpool.

"What do you say to a little entertainment, sir?"
Jonathas turned his pale, sickly eyes toward him. "Out with it."
"Why don't we test your 'absolute' power?"
Jonathas' eyes sparked. He leaned back, chest swelling. "What do you suggest?"
"We always see you capable of torturing anyone without consequence. But the question is: can you—on the other hand—do something that harms *no* one?"
Jonathas fixed him with a piercing look. "What is the game here, Johannes?"
"Nothing at all. Just a diversion. I assume you will think of something far beyond my imagination."

Jonathas' fingers toyed with his beard. "Bring me one of the long-

term prisoners," he barked.
The guards scurried to throw a shattered wreck of a man before them. Johannes's breath hitched. A few stray red hairs on the prisoner's head told the story: this was Jorvoss. The handsome, vibrant youth now looked like a piece of scorched wood carved into the shape of a man. Johannes went pale, realizing with sickening clarity that his own punishment—shame and all—had actually been Jonathas' 'mercy.'

"Release him," the Leader commanded. "Dump him in the village. Drop him in front of a church."
As they carried the man away, Jonathas turned to the stunned Johannes. "Does that answer your question?"
Johannes gripped his collar, regaining his footing. "Actually, not quite. You take pleasure in knowing you've sentenced that man to a lifetime of agony in a broken body, and you'll torment the church folk with the burden of his care. It's still for you."

Jonathas held his breath, his eyes unblinking. "Double the slave rations for today!" he ordered.
Johannes fought to keep his face neutral. "That's closer. But still not it. They will only use that energy to *suffer* longer for you. I meant something that brings you absolutely *nothing*. Can you do that?"
Johannes's voice dropped an octave. Jonathas threw him a sharp, penetrating look. "Give me an example."
"You'll only think I have a selfish motive."

Jonathas stared ahead, thinking, before boasting: "And if I set a slave free just to 'show my power'?"

"You're still doing it for *yourself*," Johannes countered. "One with absolute power gives without caring who sees or what returns."
Jonathas' expression shifted; he was beginning to see the trap. Johannes pushed further: "The **strong** give *without* counting. The weak *need* to take."
"The strong *take* without counting!" Jonathas snapped. "And the weak are crushed so they can give!"

Johannes remained preternaturally calm. "Yes, sir. What you've described is the 'Strong-Weak' man. I am speaking of the 'Strong-Strong'—the one who adds to his power an utter *independence* from need."
Suddenly, Jonathas' hand shot out, his fingers gripping Johannes's throat with sadistic precision, feeling the pulse beneath the skin. His eyes burned with a hellish fire. "Aha. My little one is finally ready for our promised debate. Let us go to my private chambers, then!"

They rose. Jonathas started to lead the way, but his right leg buckled. He nearly fell. His face contorted in shock when he realized it was Johannes who had caught him, supporting his weight. Jonathas shoved him away with visible irritation and hurried ahead with his guards.
The moment Johannes stepped into the room, the guards seized him. They dragged him to a heavy chair and bound him tightly, his limbs pinned from top to bottom. He looked at his father, searching for an answer, only to find Jonathas smiling with predatory arrogance.
"Prepare a great vat of oil," Jonathas commanded the guards. "Ready it for my feast."

The guards exited, leaving father and son alone for the first time in their lives. Johannes's eyes followed Jonathas as the man circled the chair like a wolf circling a trapped doe. Johannes fought to hide the tremor in his hands. Jonathas stopped behind him, his nails raking across Johannes's facial skin, savoring the cruelty.

"I liked the idea of us playing together," Jonathas whispered. "So I thought I'd surprise you with even more 'fun'!"
His hands left Johannes's face and struck his shoulders with manic excitement. "We shall put your *body* on the **betting** table! If **I** best you in this debate, I shall **eat** it. If you best me, it returns to you!"
Johannes recoiled, gasping as if he had been struck. He choked on his own breath until a fit of coughing took him. Jonathas' laughter filled the room. "Why so surprised? You haven't shown me much 'willpower' lately. Your entry into this life was My mistake; I might as well send you back where you 'came' from."

Johannes looked at his bound body with a wave of nausea. Then, he steeled himself. *Focus,* he told his soul. *I knew I was gambling. At least now, my fear will be my engine, not my obstacle.*
Jonathas sank slowly onto the sofa opposite the chair, waving a hand dismissively. "You should thank me for showing you the light for twenty years. Your other brothers were sent back to my belly before they even understood what light was!"

Johannes forced a smile. "Yes... I thank you. And I will consider you a magnificent father if you grant me safety until the very **end** of this debate."
Jonathas preened. "Fine. I will hold my hunger *until* the end, then

I shall devour you. But do not bore me." He crossed his legs. "Now, speak. And I shall begin the mockery."

Johannes took a deep breath to flush out the tension. "To start, I want to tell you the name of the man who changed my path—the man who made me search for God."
Jonathas bared his teeth in a grin. "By all means. Perhaps I'll snap his neck with my boot later."
Johannes smiled back. "His name is 'Jonathas, son of Johannes Vilmos'."
Jonathas recoiled, his face a mask of disbelief. "Me?!!"

They exchanged a long, silent look before Jonathas scoffed. "**I**, who planted you in sin? **I**, who fed you with the bread of oppression and raised you on vice? You've seen nothing from me **but** one depravity **after** another... and **I Am** the one who drove you to believe in God, you lunatic?"

"Exactly! Everything you just mentioned is exactly what drove me to look for someone *stronger* than you—someone who could stand *against* your tyranny."
Jonathas sneered. "Ah... I don't think you mean 'God.' Because He hasn't been able to stand in my way even once!"

"Rather, say that you haven't been able to *bypass* Him even once," Johannes countered. "Has a single week passed where you were able not to eat, not to drink, not to attend to your needs, or not to sleep?"
Jonathas stared at the ceiling, suppressing a jagged laugh. "So, in your eyes, *that* is *Him* standing against me? My foolish boy, let me tell you how I found the courage for my depravity:

I used to be a believer—so much so that I wanted the Lord to speak to me by any means necessary. I committed sins just to draw Him out, even if it meant He would speak through torture.
But guess what? The **villages** groaned *under* my cruelty, and He did **not** utter a *single* word."

Johannes narrowed his eyes. "By that logic, I should conclude from the fact that I am still alive that you are **weak**. If you were truly strong, you would have **killed** me as you did my brothers, **rather** than me concluding that you've '**allowed**' me to live by *your* very will."
Jonathas inspected his nails with a scoff. "*Allowed* me to do? What ***kind*** of Master is this who lets his slaves *revel* in their rebellion and *curse* Him while He watches '**by choice**'?"

Johannes countered instantly: "A Master who is **certain** that His slaves will *never* escape the death He has imposed upon them, **whether** they like it or not!"
The sentence pricked Jonathas. Johannes pressed the advantage. "You weren't satisfied with your father, and you aren't satisfied with your own death now. Does it not seem, sir, that someone from above has passed a judgment upon you that *contradicts* your very will?"

"Do you know what I *hate* most about the religious?" Jonathas replied dismissively. "They turn *coincidences* into 'proofs' of their alleged God's greatness."
"What coincidence are you talking about, sir? Is there a human being who will not die? Is that a coincidence, or a truth imposed upon both the master **and** the slave?" Johannes swallowed hard

before adding with conviction, "***No*** rational mind can deny the existence of laws in this world.
And as a leader, you know better than anyone that organization implies an Organizer."

Jonathas tilted his nose up in a boastful tilt. "Empty talk. **I Am not** subject to the laws of this *collapsing* body. Do **not** cite its weakness as evidence; it does **not** represent me! **I Am** above it!
If **I** were defined by my body, I wouldn't have been able to control a **single** man with its strength alone. But **I**... **I Am** the one who controls *all* these people!"

Johannes leaned back as far as his bonds allowed. "But **without** your body, humanity will **forget** you. Since the Lord legislates over **your** flesh, He has His grip on **you**." He read his father's face before adding, "I am saying *whatever* I wish right now because you *allow* it. But if you truly wanted to, you could **easily** silence my will by *using* my body."

Jonathas studied Johannes's eyes, finding a strength he had never seen there. "And **I** grant you **My** favor by not doing so," he remarked haughtily.
"Yes. I admire that you keep your word once spoken. And thus, I believe you understand the Lord perfectly when He grants us His favor and waits *patiently* until the very *end* of our life's term."

Jonathas leaned back against the sofa, letting out a series of disjointed laughs. "Damn you! What have you done in these three months, boy?"
Johannes smiled. "Sir, what I am saying to you is what I've

concluded **since** my childhood, simply by observing *you*. You have been my lesson my entire life."

Jonathas waved a hand dismissively. "All of it is just the fruit of **your** own imagination. There *isn't* a single piece of evidence linking your suspicions to our **reality**. You could just as easily consider it an *illusion* and move on with your life."

"Sir, every man is free to prepare for the *reality of death* or *consider* it an illusion—so long as his breath still flows!"

Jonathas' eyes shifted back to mockery. "You poor soul. You have nothing *but* death, which no one **even** knows is a hollow end or not. Give me **real** evidence that links your 'reality' to the heavens *now*!"

Johannes looked toward the upper right, searching his memory. "My reality? When I was in the mine, coal fell on my foot. It was agonizing. I couldn't stand even as the driver rained blows upon me..."
"...And you called upon the Lord," Jonathas interrupted with disdain, "and as usual, *nothing* happened."

"On the contrary, sir. The pain vanished from my foot as if..."
"Johannes, those are just **thoughts**!" Jonathas groaned. "I want a **tangible** reason that ***changed*** reality, something that has ***no*** explanation other than... ***direct*** intervention from God."

Johannes knit his brows. "Fine. I have one. When I prayed for the first time in the pen and begged the Lord to save me, I closed my

eyes and saw a strange dream: that you were ill and calling for me. I didn't understand it, of course. But when you brought me out, I was stunned to hear you are ill. It was as if the Lord wanted to tell me then..."

Jonathas' breathing grew heavy before he cut him off with a mocking gesture. "And **how** do I even know if you actually dreamed it or not?"

Johannes's shoulders slumped. "You're right. I'll give you evidence from Catherina's life. She was *always* praying and pleading with the Lord. The truth is, for *no* logical reason, I loved her, even though she wasn't **particularly** beautiful. I wanted her *for* myself, so why did I sacrifice *myself* for her?"

"Not just you," Jonathas remarked, "but the slave as well." He paused, a realization dawning on him. "Johannes, is that the same piece of trash I just released?"
Johannes nodded. Jonathas shot him a fierce look, but Johannes immediately stepped in to defend his position. "I did not *specify* anything, and you didn't specify anything when you gave the order!"

Jonathas shifted his position, ready to call the guards to bring the man back, but then he sighed with forced patience. "Let it be. Let him *suffer* in his rotting body." He returned his gaze to Johannes. "Should we use this *coincidence* to say the Lord is the one who saved him?"

"Actually," Johannes said, "our *talk* of the Lord **is** what made me

ask for that challenge in the first place. So yes, the Lord saved him in *both* cases."
A laugh escaped Jonathas. He wiped his eye. "Fine. I'll give you that one. The Lord was indeed the *reason* he got out!"

Jonathas rubbed his nose, then pressed the sharp tip of his index finger into Johannes's forehead. "I challenge you to give me evidence from my *own* life, since you're always studying it!"
Johannes bore the weight of the finger, feeling a drop of blood trickle between his eyebrows.

"In your youth, you asked the Lord to make you a saint. And He did."
Jonathas pulled his hand back. "He did?!"
"Are you not 'sacred' now? There are at least a hundred men under your command, and the villagers *fear* you and your men above all else!"
"That is not what I asked for," Jonathas said in a low voice, his eyes growing dull.
"Yes, it is. You asked to be a saint for *your* own sake, *not* to exalt the word of the Lord. And that is **exactly** what happened. You gained glory *without* having any relationship with Him."

Jonathas took sharp, angry breaths before exploding. "And do you **dare** suggest that the *logical* path was to live as a laborer, surviving on a year's crop, when I **could** live as a king with vaults **full** of gold?"
"Logic, sir, says: '*If you live in your weakness, you are in the core of truth*.' Because, as you said, you control others by ***deluding*** them with your skill into thinking they must exalt you. And even

you... you live in the ***illusion*** that you are powerful and possess *absolute* strength!"

Jonathas' glare was razor-sharp. Johannes added with a hint of trepidation, "Sir, if you want me to flatter you now, then the debate is over—and I am off to the oil."
Jonathas' brow relaxed, his mouth curling into a smile. He shrugged with indifference. "My **illusion** as a **strong** man is far more **sophisticated** than your **illusion** as a worshiper of a God you **cannot** see!"

"That would be true if I didn't see Him."
Mockery flooded Jonathas' face. "You must have inherited those *supernatural* eyes from your mother!"
Johannes smiled back. "And from you as well. All three of us see the universe painting for us the traces of greatness and power..."
"Do you know what surprises me about you?" Jonathas interrupted. "That you *never* asked about your mother, even though you were young."
Johannes forced himself to whisper, "Must I listen to you brag about killing her?"
Jonathas' face lit up. "You haven't disappointed me! Let me *explore* this emotion now!"

He bared his teeth, reaching for some nuts with a casual air. To the sound of his chewing, he began to explain the method of Johannes's mother's murder in the most agonizing detail possible. On the other side, Johannes listened, gritting his teeth in silence, though his face flushed red and his breathing quickened.
When the criminal grew bored with his boasting, he said, "I think

your thigh will be more delicious when it's stuffed with nuts.. Are we finished with this debate?"
Johannes looked to the left, suppressing his rage. "If you want it to end, it’s over."

The father leaned in close, his lips pulled back over his teeth. "So, the Lord **won't** save you from the frying? Has He **failed** because you **aren't** in His line of sight here?"

Johannes pulled his head back as far as he could, his voice steady. "If the Lord sees fit to save me now, He will. If **not**, then He **won't**. He is my **Lord**; I am **not** His."
Jonathas clasped his hands behind his back mockingly. "What faith, Johannes! I’m moved!" He tilted his head back and shouted at the ceiling, "**Listen, God of Johannes! I challenge You to save Johannes from me *now* ! I challenge You, You Weakling!!**"

Jonathas circled Johannes with a fragmented laugh. He glanced at Johannes from the corner of his eye. "I’m *sorry* for you. I believed with you and I spoke to Him. But look—*no* answer from the weak!"
He threw a boastful laugh and turned his face away. Johannes remarked pointedly: "Tell me, why are you walking *so* slowly, my *powerful* Master? I feel your gait is trying to say 'something'."

Jonathas' mouth went still for a moment. Johannes continued seriously: "Please, sir, stop the arrogance. Let us speak with logic."
Jonathas spread his hands. "The logic that **no** matter how **much** you call, you find **no** answer?"
"No. The logic that He will answer you in ***His*** way, **not** yours."

Jonathas exhaled sharply. "Don't you want logic?! I have done **more** than this for **forty** years, and to **this** very day, I find **No** answer and **No** punishment!! There is **No** one. There is **No** Lord. **No** matter how smart you *think* you are or how *impressed* you are... you are *deluding* yourself!!"

Jonathas' breaths were coming fast; it was as if he had just heaved a great weight off his chest. Words rushed to Johannes's tongue. His mind screamed *don't say it*, but he said it anyway:
"Are you so afraid that He actually exists, sir?"
Jonathas' face went pale at the shocking question. A wave of overwhelming rage surged through him. He covered his face with his hand, speaking in a dry, raspy voice: "Rather, I fear I made a mistake when I *didn't* sink my claws into your eyes."

But Johannes answered coldly, the blood having drained from his face: "As if the One who has *kept* you from **killing** me for *twenty* years is *still* keeping His word, **even** until this **very** moment?"
Jonathas surged with a violent upheaval of rage. He lunged in front of him, sinking his claws into Johannes's shoulders—just at the base of his neck—with a strength intended to crush. His face was a mask of demonic satisfaction. "**No** one keeps **Me** from killing you but **Me**, you raving idiot!"

Johannes's features contorted, his entire nervous system reeling from the agonizing shock. His clothes began to soak with a deep crimson stain as his father loomed over him like a dark, towering shroud, his eyes bulging, his hot, savage breath spraying Johannes's face. Suddenly, Johannes's nerves snapped; the primal

instinct for survival overthrew all reason.

In the next heartbeat, Johannes's body writhed against his bonds in a desperate, serpentine struggle. His knee collided sharply with Jonathas. The Leader let out a cry of pain and, in an involuntary defensive reflex, shoved Johannes away with all his might. The chair flipped backward; its heavy wooden front legs kicked upward, and one of them struck Jonathas with a finishing blow directly at his most vulnerable point. He was hurled back, unleashing a deafening, terrible scream that echoed through the stone walls.

The Leader collapsed onto the nearest sofa, half-sprawled on the floor, writhing as he spent the last of his strength to fight the escalating agony. He shivered, his legs scraping the floor, his face drowned in torment, eyes nearly popping from the electric shock of the pain.
At that same moment, Johannes hit the floor on his back, the chair slamming down with a force that rattled his brain. The guards burst into the room, desperate to rescue their master.

Upside down and dazed, Johannes ignored the thunderous hammering of his own heart to listen to their frantic whispers. He realized with a pale, hollow certainty that he had crossed a point of no return.
Minutes passed like burning coals before one of the guards righted the chair. He stared at Johannes, bewildered. "This is strange; he is still fully bound.. he bears the marks of torture."

Johannes opened his trembling eyes to see Jonathas among his guards, sitting hunched on the sofa, his face etched with

exhaustion and lingering pain.
Overcome by the sheer terror of the moment, Johannes burst into tears. He was possessed by an absolute despair of ever escaping the torture chamber, let alone surviving after that. He had always dreaded offending his father with a single word—what would the price be for this "madness"?

A minute passed as the guards watched them: the father writhing physically, the son writhing spiritually. Johannes's panic made him forget his open wounds and the stinging heat of his blood, which by now was indistinguishable from the color of his flushed face. Suddenly, Jonathas' voice tore through the silence like a thunderclap: "Get out of the room!"

They scrambled out without a second thought. As the door slammed shut, the father's voice roared again: "Are you crying *now*, you fool?!"
Johannes swallowed his tears, wishing the earth would open up and swallow him. Jonathas managed a pained smile. "*Exactly* at the moment I *intended* to sink my nails into your throat!"

Jonathas whispered to his own soul, almost happily: *I waited for the Lord to restrain me for over forty years. He is strong; He doesn't need to strike me. It was enough that He did not protect me from my own stupid movement.*

On his face, laughter mingled with agony. "**I** challenged the Lord, Johannes... and now look who is the *weak* one among us. It is Me... yes, Me... I Am the *weak* one!"
Jonathas leaned back, struggling like a madman to laugh while his

nerves screamed in protest. Bitter tears of conflict ran down his reddened cheeks. Johannes watched him, wide-eyed like a child, breathless and stunned. His mind repeated a single phrase: *He's a freak... he's a total freak!!*

It took some time before Jonathas settled into an eerie calmness. "Fine," he said quietly. "I believe in the Lord now. But how do you prove, oh great philosopher, that He is the God of Christ, and why does He not control the minds of men as He controls their bodies?"

Johannes could hardly believe his ears. He swallowed hard, sharpening his choked voice to answer. "He doesn't control their minds because... because..."
Jonathas showed a faint smile, answering for himself: "Because when they exalt Him, He wants them to do it *truthfully*, because He *truly is* great! He doesn't want to force anyone to utter it out of fear... like I do."

The words caught in Johannes's throat from sheer amazement. He coughed and said, "As for Him being the Father of Christ..."
Jonathas seized the reins of the answer again. "He is *not* his father! Christ is a human being whom the Lord created in a *special* way, to be a *special* Messenger."
Johannes bowed his head, bewildered. "I am happy to hear you say that, sir."

Jonathas tilted his head back, reciting with a faint smile: "'Now this is eternal life: that they know You, the *only* true God, and Jesus Christ, whom You have sent.' Johannes, Chapter

Seventeen... I believe it’s the third verse."
Johannes was awestruck. "You **still** remember that after **forty** years?!"
"What do you expect from a young man who wanted to be a saint?"
The two exchanged smiles that bloomed amidst the pain. Johannes seized the opportunity he had never dreamed of: "Then let us leave this contradictory religion and—"
"And why do you claim it is contradictory?" Jonathas interjected with a firm, sharp tone.

Johannes felt a wave of confusion; it was as if Jonathas had reclaimed his past and was ready to defend his faith with ferocity. He hesitated, answering in a low, wavering voice: "In the past months, I’ve heard most of the Bible. It felt... inconsistent."
Jonathas replied gravely, "That is *because* you are reading it for the **first** time. By the **tenth** time, a faith will be born in your heart that will **blind** you to those flaws!"

Johannes froze, stealing a glance at his father’s piercing eyes, until Jonathas finally broke into a roar of laughter. "You simpleton!! Did you actually believe me? Didn't you hear what I said? I told you it would '**blind you**' to them!"
Johannes let out a long breath. "Heh... you had me worried there."
"Is Jonathas the Profligate more *comforting* than the Monk?" he mocked.
"At least I know who you are this way!"

Jonathas chuckled, even as the movement provoked his pain.

"And what contradiction struck you the most, Johannes?"
"The Prophets. They are the chosen ones, yet they commit sins that would bar anyone else from heaven!"
Jonathas rubbed his chin. "Yes. I used to think that if I became a saint, I would be **purer** than the prophets."

Johannes looked at his father with a newfound gravity that made Jonathas fall silent. "I am no longer a Christian," Johannes finally confessed. "That religion is **older** than old; there is no *clear* version of it left."
Jonathas' gaze sharpened. "Have you abandoned the faith of your fathers, you traitor?"
Johannes laughed softly. "Yes. I have submitted—I have become a Muslim."

Jonathas scowled. "You became *what* exactly?"
"You know those who do us 'favors,' the ones who keep the King busy in the south?"
"You mean His Majesty's enemies," Jonathas sneered. "The Ottomans."
"Yes. They have a **logical** religion; exactly what I believed *before* I even knew the word 'religion.' You believe there is *one* God who controls the laws of the universe, and that He sent a Messenger named Muhammad... and that is it. No father, no son, no trinity, nothing."

Jonathas shifted, his interest piqued. "And they don't know Christ?"
"On the contrary, Islam is an *extension* of Christ's message. We must believe in Christ as a Teacher and a Messenger... created by

Allah through His Spirit from the Virgin Maria, without..."
"You said 'Allah'?" Jonathas interrupted.
"Ah, yes... in the language of the Messenger Muhammad, they refer to the Lord as 'Allah'."
Jonathas leaned back. "Christ, too, Johannes... in his own Aramaic tongue, he called the Lord 'Allaha'."
Johannes was taken aback, then he smiled at his father. "Will I end up learning religion from you after all?"

But Jonathas did not smile back. His hand touched his elbow and he turned his face away, lost in distant thought. Johannes watched him, amazed by his behavior; he had noticed from the start that Jonathas had deliberately abstained from wine and seemed to be debating with genuine focus.

Johannes whispered to himself: *I understand the heart of the matter now. Jonathas is nearing death; he is thinking of what comes after. He invented the 'eating my flesh' threat just to pretend he was playing with me, while in truth, he wanted to talk to me without losing his prestige.*

Jonathas spoke again: "Johannes, you have killed, raped, and stolen by your own hand and *your* own will. Did that deacon guarantee you that the Lord has actually forgiven you and wants to unite with you in heaven?"
Johannes recoiled. "The deacon? No! I speak to Allah myself, five times every day, and I ask Him for forgiveness."

Jonathas surprised. "Five times every day? Are you a monk in your religion?"
"There are *no* monks in my religion. This is a duty for everyone...

so that we remember Him at all times." Johannes felt his father's interest, so he added: "By *remebering* the Presence of the Strong One at all times, your own weakness will *no* longer haunt you, Father. And when you *trust* His promise of a land full of doubled earthly delights, your logic will *find peace* with losing them here."

As soon as Johannes fell silent, he flinched at the sound of Jonathas' knife being unsheathed. Jonathas' face was as cold as stone. Johannes's eyes froze as his father rose and circled the chair. Johannes braced for the worst.
Instead, he felt the sharp strike of the blade severing his bonds. He waited a heartbeat before his father's heavy palms landed on his shoulders—shoulders that began to scream from the pain of his wounds.

A minute of silence passed. Johannes felt his heart beating in his throat. Finally, Jonathas whispered from above his son's head: "I will not be a saint. But it is fine if a part of Me becomes one. Let me see a face like Mine in Paradise."
Then, he returned to his commanding tone: "Leave me!! And know that if I find you in **my** territory after **three** days, I shall consider you my **enemy**."

He turned away. Johannes rose, shaking the ropes from his legs, rubbing his wrists. He looked in disbelief at his father, who was standing by the window. Had this horrific debate truly ended in peace? Had he been pardoned without any retribution? Stranger still, Jonathas had done the unthinkable: he had turned his back on Johannes while they were alone in the room.

Finally, Johannes held his breath and stepped toward him gently. "I did not seek this debate to **save** my life; I didn't **even** know you would put my life at stake."
He paused for a moment before adding: "Father, I do not think something as great as Paradise could **ever** escape a mind as *sharp* as yours."

Jonathas shot a piercing glance at his son from the corner of his eye, whispering in a voice that was barely a breath, "Even if the Lord overlooks what I have done... I will **not** forget it. Paradise is **not** for the filthy."
Johannes stepped closer. His face held no trace of the old fear, only a gentle, immovable persistence.

"Our Lord is perfect, Father, because He joins His ***Absolute*** **Power** with ***Absolute*** **Love**. He tells us:
«***Do not despair of the mercy of God; indeed, God forgives all sins. indeed, it is He who is the Forgiveness, the merciful***»
Do **not** let the weight of your crimes outsize the mercy of the Lord. He loves it when you believe that **He is the Greatest**."

Jonathas ground his teeth, but Johannes continued, his voice thick with emotion: "Listen to this: there was a man who killed a **hundred** souls—a living example of exactly what you and I have done. When he finally decided to take a **single** step *toward* repentance, death took him first. And yet, God showed him *mercy*... simply for that ***one*** step."

Johannes gestured broadly to the empty air of the room. "**Just** because he ***tried***, Father!"

He took a breath before adding, "You may have to **compensate** people for your injustice for a thousand years of reckoning, perhaps... but **Do not** slam the door of hope behind you. **Do not** give your Lord a *reason* to leave you locked in your torment forever. Just **apologize**. Try to make amends."

" **'I'** apologize?!" Jonathas barked instinctively.
"What '**I**,' Father?" Johannes retorted with sharp disdain. "In a few days, there will be no more 'I'!"
Jonathas jerked his face away, his shoulders finally slumping.

Johannes turned to him, his tone now one of pure supplication. "Please, look. This is what you **must** do if you *truly* wish to apologize: wash yourself with clean water, exalt the Lord in your heart, and turn toward Him with **love** and **reverence**."
In the heavy silence of the room, broken only by the wailing of the wind outside, Johannes did the one thing his father never expected.
He knelt. Then, he pressed his forehead to the ground in a majestic, solemn prostration.
He remained there for seconds, anchored to the earth. Jonathas watched, frozen in a shock that paralyzed his limbs. That single act of prostration was the most powerful message Johannes could have sent—a sight that struck terror into Jonathas' darkened soul.

When Johannes rose, Jonathas stared at him with an arched brow of sheer amazement. "Is *that* what you were doing in Pratus when Raphael thought you were sleeping on the ground?"
Johannes smiled and nodded. "It is time to trade in your wine, Father."

Jonathas turned away instantly, his voice returning to a sharp command. "Go! Run! Before I change my mind."

Johannes exhaled, finding no choice but to rush out of the room. But the moment he closed the door, he was struck by a memory of his old vision: the dream where he had left the sick Jonathas to his fate, "closing the door" and walking away. He stood stunned for a heartbeat. His feet almost carried him away, but he turned back and threw the door open one last time.
"The Lord has lengthened your life **despite** the prayers of the people against you **because** He ***wants*** you! Do **not** disappoint Him!"

Johannes slammed that door of evil shut. He ran with all his might, clutching onto hope.
The moment his feet touched the threshold of the outer gate, the sight of the open sky intoxicated him.
Braced by the cool breeze of freedom, his heart sang for the first time in his life..
There would be a Johannes without a Jonathas!!

The Realistic Ending: The Leader continued to struggle against his illness for days until he was betrayed by one of his own men, who murdered him brutally and seized command—ending a thirty-year reign of terror. Years later, the Ottomans invaded the region, uprooting the gangs and liberating the people from the criminals.

However, if you prefer a 'Happier' Ending, read the Bonus Chapter below.

Bonus Chapter:

Jonathas' Deal

The door finally clicked shut. Only then did Jonathas allow his tensed, aching body to collapse. He exhaled a long, jagged breath, covering his face with his palms. Never in his life had he allowed his son to speak so freely to him. That was why he had refused to acknowledge him for all those years. Now, he struggled to hide from his own savage nature the fact that he had actually listened—and had set the boy free after everything he dared to say.

He jumped when the door flew open again.
"The Lord has lengthened your life **despite** the prayers of the people against you **because** He ***wants*** you! Do **not** disappoint Him!"
Then Johannes was gone. To the sound of those retreating, running footsteps, Jonathas lowered his hands, his fingers splayed nervously. His soul whispered in protest: *I don't **disappoint** Him?! What expectations of **Me**?! Have I left anything worth expecting? I have walked a path of no return. Yes... no return. No return.*

He raised his eyes, staring with a sense of deprivation toward the sky. "Absolute power and absolute *love*," he whispered hollowly. "And I... I had never known what *love* is. I see it makes people into fools; I thought it intoxicates like wine. But if the **Lord** *loves,* then that gives Love a *different* definition."
He sat slowly on the sofa, fighting the tide of pain. "What made that boy utter *those* words?"

I have survived the pursuit of soldiers by miracles-like ways. I have wondered how my enemies missed an opening when my sword slipped. I have marveled at how my partners never betrayed me. I have stolen and killed without a shadow of fear, as if my soul were pre-guaranteed safety... Was that truly the Lord's answer to my ancient prayer?
"Well," he muttered, "I explained it all away as 'Me.' But I know... it *wasn't* me."
He clenched his fists, his lips trembling. "In my depths, I know it *wasn't* me."

He writhed, tilting his head back. "I did the impossible to erase You from my life, knowing all the while that You existed outside my dark tent. And here You are, about to erase me with lowly insects, turning me into dust to be stepped upon."

He scowled, his eyes narrowing. "I did the impossible so that I would not die... so I would not have to face the moment where the Truth is known. But You insisted on making me spend **months** *living* in it. Months spent with my thoughts oscillating between life and death."
He screamed internally, *I am tired! Tired!*
"Damn it! That boy has made me lose confidence in myself. The spark in his eyes made me long for the passion of my own youth."

At the memory of his vanished youth, his breath hitched. "I can hardly believe it. Johannes searched for the Lord *without* anyone deluding him into it. He didn't... *even*... know His name!"
He closed his eyes, stung by the bitterness of his failure. "I kept

him in my cage to prove to myself that God was merely a *social illusion*. Instead, he proved to me that worship is something etched into the *core* of a human being. Why? Why? WHY?!!"

He sank his claws into his own hair, seething at his reality. He was trapped between life and death—unable to enjoy his lusts, unable to undo what he had done, and unable to forget the struggle as the pain increased day by day.

For months, Jonathas had been re-convincing his anxious soul that death was a final sleep, a point of ultimate silence, and that he was merely enjoying himself until the last ember went out. But his old beliefs refused to release him. Instead, they worked tirelessly to shatter his illusions, leaving him in a state of suffocating tension.
Suddenly, Johannes had appeared to bridge the gap between his past and present, sparking a flicker of hope for the very faith Jonathas had spent a lifetime wounding.

A moment later, Jessica entered. She had knocked, and receiving no answer, let herself in. She lingered for a heartbeat, reading his state, before approaching with her usual practiced charm.
"How foolish of me! When I saw Johannes fleeing like that... I feared he had dared to raise a hand against you. But…"

She trailed off. She realized that the man who was supposed to be her husband was drowning in a pained trance. She sat beside him, touching him gently. "I see the pain has returned, my lord. I've prepared a new herbal remedy; please, let me try it."
Jonathas surprised her with a dry, hollow question: "Why do you

care for my recovery? Wouldn't it be **better** for you if I died?"
"How can you say such a thing, my l—"
"Jessica!!" he roared. "Answer me. Is it not **better** for you if I died?"

Her tongue faltered as she scrambled for a reply that would satisfy him without condemning herself. He cut her off as he stood. "You have already answered. I do **not** want you near me again."
She followed him, pleading, "Please, listen... my tongue was tied by your majesty, and—"

Before she could finish, Jonathas slammed the door in her face. She was left outside, trembling and bewildered. Inside,
Jonathas' face was still etched with rage as he whispered a routine reassurance to his soul: "I am strong. I conquer everyone. No one is safe from my wrath."
He said it out of habit, though his lips were so cold they felt heavy with resistance. He walked toward his bedchamber, his teeth aching from the pressure of his clenched jaw. Suddenly, his composure snapped. He lashed out, punching the wall, his eyes bulging.

"If only this were a game that could end! What is this state I am in?! I feel the weight of the whole world on my chest."
He leaned his forehead against the stone, writhing in spiritual agony. He lunged for a bottle of wine and began to gulp it down greedily, desperate to escape himself. But where can one flee when the pursuer is within?

He hurled the empty bottle aside. Still reeling from the weight of his soul, he hurried to crawl into bed, seeking refuge in sleep. But the wine, which had masked the pain and numbed his body, made him forget to care for his illness and move slowly. His feet betrayed him. He fell face-forward onto the floor, letting out a shriek of agony that returned like a lightning strike from the void.

His groans filled the room as he forced his tortured body to heave itself toward the bed. He finally collapsed onto the mattress and let his eyelids shut, hoping to hide behind the curtain of sleep. But when the torment is in the soul, even sleep has no power to intercede.
The truth was that sleep did not take him out of his reality; it plunged him into another—a memory from his youth. The dream dragged him back forty years, forcing him to relive a moment that time had failed to erase: “

The young Jonathas—vibrant, lithe, and full of life—was returning from the seminary for a holiday at his father’s house on the edge of the farmlands. A cool breeze toyed with his long black hair as he stared, mesmerized, at a gemstone glittering in his hand.
The moment he entered the house, he slumped into a chair, his mind entirely consumed by the treasure. His younger brother, Jacobus, approached to catch a glimpse of the shining stone, but Jonathas pushed him away. With a boastful laugh, he began to run, teasing his brother.

But a small thing crossed his path and turned the world upside down. Jonathas tripped. Despite his efforts to balance, he hit the ground hard. The gemstone flew from his hand, striking a rusted

metal cooking pot and shattering into pieces.
Jonathas stared in horror at the shards scattered everywhere. A violent tremor of rage shook his nerves. Suddenly, he lunged at his brother's cat—the creature that had tripped him. He seized it, sinking his fingers into its neck, and began to torture it. He choked it, then crushed its limbs, while Jacobus stood below, screaming and trying in vain to pull the cat from his older brother's hands.

Jacobus ran to fetch their father from the field. But by the time the father arrived, the cat was nothing but scattered remains around that same metal pot. His son Jonathas was splattered with blood from head to toe, panting with fury.
The father was horrified. "What are you doing at the church if you haven't even learned mercy toward Christ's creatures?!" he shouted. "I gave you to Christ so you could fulfill your desire to be a saint, and you don't **even** respect Him!"

Jonathas snarled, his nerves taut. "Christ does ***not*** exist, Father! Why didn't he save the 'poor' cat just now? Enough!! I have decided to leave this nonsense!"
The father went pale. He stood with his hands at his sides, swallowing hard, exchanging glares with his son whose eyes were spitting sparks. Finally, he managed to speak: "Surely the anger has made you lose your mind..."

"**No**!!" Jonathas cut him off firmly. "I have returned with **no** intention of ever stepping foot in that madhouse again. Listen to me: there is **no** Lord, **no** Christ, **no** Spirit of nothingness. It is just a *trick* to control us!"

The father lost his patience. He seized Jonathas by the collar and screamed, "You mad one!! Even if you no longer wish to go, **shut** your mouth! Do **not** speak this way... these are **sacred** things! Do you understand? *Sacred!* Never speak ill of them again, or else..."

Jonathas leveled his gaze at his father and curled his lip into the first wicked smile of his life. He opened his mouth and hurled his first blasphemy against the sacred. The father went into a frenzy at such insolence; he threw Jonathas to the ground and beat him with a staff until he was exhausted.
"From tomorrow, you return to the plow, you wretch!" the father gasped. "And I was the one hoping you'd be a Bishop... may Christ kill this 'demon' that has entered your head."

That night was long—so long that it remained etched in Jonathas' mind forever. He was at the crossroads of his life. He knew his father would forgive him if he apologized in the morning, but...
*"**I** apologize to him?! No. I will not live my life like a stupid sheep for the sake of his petty anger. He is just an ignorant peasant; he doesn't know how they enslave him with a single word... 'Sacred'."*

In the morning, he said nothing, maintaining a face of cold fury. His father forced him to the fields to plow. But the moment his father's back was turned, Jonathas would stop and stare around him, as if re-identifying his environment. After several instances, his father struck him, shouting, "You don't want to learn, and you don't want to work? What in heaven's name do you want?!"
Jonathas wiped his face and paused for a heartbeat before shouting back, "Why should I work like an ox, when I am *rich*??"

The father was stunned. "He even sees things in reverse... what devil is this..."
"No!" Jonathas interrupted gravely. "I can prove it to you. I have hidden them in the house. We can live like *kings*, Father!"

Jonathas smiled, trying to coax his father into a better mood. He dropped the plow. "When you see them, you'll believe me!"
He ran to the house with his father shouting after him. Inside, Jonathas emerged from his room clutching a leather pouch. He opened it, revealing a handful of precious coins and jewels. "See? **No** need to work!!"
The father took the bag, his hands shaking. Once he was certain the treasure was real, he raised his eyes slowly to his proud son. "And *where* did you get **all** this?"
"Some I stole from the church," Jonathas boasted. "The rest I snatched from the—"

Before he could finish, his father's palm struck his face with more force than he had ever felt. Jonathas was thrown back against the wall. Through the ringing in his ears, he heard his father's voice erupting in fury.
"You steal?! You steal, you madman!! I **toil** all day to feed you an honest morsel, and you spend your time **thieving**?!"

Jonathas held his head to stop the world from spinning. He leaned against the wall to stand. "So we work like *beasts* just to eat a cheap plate of food at the end of the day?!"
"Yes! *Better* than stealing! Better than eating **filthy** food! Better than depriving an owner of his—"
"It's all **nonsense**!" Jonathas exploded. "Nonsense they use to exploit us and make us produce their food!"

"Who are 'they'...?!"
"The ones who live like kings while we are the oxen of their lands! I studied theology; I know everything. It's all a ruse. Leave it behind and let us find our own path to happiness!"

The father froze. Jonathas continued in a softened tone, "Come, let us enjoy life. I'll buy you a whole goat for dinner. You won't sleep until you are in a daze of pleasure. I can even buy you a maid, and—"
"Jonathas!!!!" his father roared.
Jonathas fell silent for a moment, then crossed his arms wickedly. "Fine. Don't do it! But I... *I* will live like a **king**, and you will find yourself serving me whether you like it or not. Let your **Christ** help you then!!"

At those reckless words, the father's eyes turned blood-red. He lunged his massive frame at Jonathas' youthful body, striking and punching him, having lost all control. Suddenly, Jacobus's voice broke through, sobbing in terror from behind the table: "Stop! Stop! No... no!"
The father snapped back to his senses. He realized he was on the verge of murdering his son. He traced a cross over his own bloodied face, taking deep, ragged breaths before he finally found the strength to stand. He grabbed Jonathas' bag and ran toward the church to return it.

Jonathas was in the worst state of his life. But would he retreat?
"As long as I breathe, I will defend my right. I will not let his grip choke the breath of freedom from me."
He muttered this as he tried to rise, before the pain claimed his

consciousness and he collapsed on the floor. Jacobus sat by the table, burying his head in his arms and weeping, having witnessed the most brutal scene of his young life.

When Jonathas woke, he was in bed. He forced his swollen eyes open to see the Priest reciting hymns over him, a hand resting on his forehead. Jonathas pushed past the pain of his bruised lips to speak:
"Leave me be. I have **renounced** your religion. I do **not** believe in your Christ. **No** *devil* forced me into this. I am Jonathas Vilmos—**the new Devil**!"
The Priest recoiled, then adjusted his features to regain his composure. "Jonathas, remember your passion, the beautiful moments you spent in study..."
"You can enjoy whatever you've *convinced* yourself of," Jonathas interrupted. "But as for me, I have decided to search for a happiness that overwhelms me *even* if I reject it!"
"Only the Lord can give you that, my son. Do not step outside of Christ's mercy!"

"Let Christ hold me back with *all* his might from doing what I want," Jonathas mocked. "Go on, where is he? Can he not control his *own* servant?"
After a long debate, the Priest left the house. Jonathas' father followed him out. The Priest stopped on the road. "I am sorry. He does this of his **own full will**."
"Are you sure, sir?" the father asked, his voice choked.

"He has been my student for five years. I know that steel-like persistence he possesses... especially since you introduced violence into the matter." The Priest sighed. "The same passion

that was directing him toward being a saint is now directing him toward being a devil. There is nothing left for us but to pray that he returns to his senses. May Christ compensate you, my brother."

The Priest left, leaving the father to dissolve in shame and helplessness. He looked to the sky, begging for a miracle. Would his son be excommunicated? Cast out from mercy? He pleaded with Christ for any miracle that would save him from this scandal and the brand of shame that would mark him forever.

The following day, Jonathas sat at the table, his face a map of bruises. He was surprised to find his plate heaped with bread and meat. He looked at his brother Jacobus's plate—it held the usual meager portion—while his father's plate was only half-full.
"If the problem is that you aren't full," his father explained quietly, "we can solve it as you see."
Jonathas narrowed his eyes. "I am not full, I have nothing to drink, I have no maids, no servants, no palace, and I am forced to work. These are my problems. Can you solve them all with your 'honest' labor?"

The father fell silent, eating with a bitter heart. "Even a *king* has limits," he finally replied. "**No** one can do *everything* they please. And even if you could, life would be hollow and meaningless, my son."
"I can put in the **same** effort you do and have a *larger* share of life," Jonathas snapped. "Why should I settle for **less** just because you are *submissive* to the Church's deceptions?"

The father buried his face in his hands. "What can I say to you

that the Priest hasn't already said?"
"Say nothing. I am your son, **Not** your slave. **I** will live as **I** please, and **you** live as **You** please."
"Truly?" the father growled. "And the **shame** and the **curse** you bring upon Me, your brother, and your aunt—where are we to dump that?"
Jonathas blew out a breath. "I will travel. I'll leave you to your 'honor'."
"I raised you!" the father shook with rage. "I cared for you! And now that your mustache has finally grown, you'll just walk away as if you were born *this* tall?"

Jonathas smiled wickedly. "Should I take Jacobus with me?"
"No!!" Jacobus cried, jumping up. "I won't go with you no matter what you do!"
Jonathas laughed softly, picking up his food. "See how much you *gain* when you take my path, you fool!"
Suddenly, the table rattled under his father's fist. "Is it not enough that I have you, without you corrupting your brother, you—!!"

The room filled with the father's heavy, angry breathing, but Jonathas ignored him, eating with total indifference. Days passed this way, with the heartbroken father giving half his food to a son who barely worked, while he himself hungered and toiled in vain.

Eventually, illness took hold of the father, and poverty began to invade their home more aggressively each day. Jonathas remained the same—cunning, slow, and poisonous, his words killing his father bit by bit, without a shred of mercy.

Then came the cursed day. Jonathas sat down to eat but found only a dry crust of bread and a cup of water. Anger flared in his chest, but he ate it quickly. "Is this all? Hand over your 'honor' then; perhaps I'll find something in it to silence my stomach!"
The father did not raise his pale eyes. Hunger and sickness had extinguished his spirit. He was a withered, wretched frame. Finally, he moved a trembling hand to pass his own half of crust to his son. His look told stories of woe; he knew this was his final act to clear his conscience of the thief he had sired.
"That's enough, Jonathas!" Jacobus shouted, his voice cracking. "Can't you see how sick our father is? Leave him his **bread**!"

Jonathas snatched the bread and threw it violently back onto his father's plate. He gave Jacobus an unsettling smile and walked toward his room. The father closed his eyes, exhaling in agony, when Jacobus's voice suddenly pierced the air in terror: "NOOOOO!!! FATHER, WATCH OUT—!!"

The father opened his eyes one last time before his features contorted. His face hit the table, bathed instantly in the blood gushing from his throat. Jonathas stood over him, smiling, clutching the knife.
"When I tell you I am hungry," Jonathas said, "you will feed me, **even** if it is from your *own* flesh!"

He turned a playful, terrifying gaze toward the stunned Jacobus. "I, too, pity our father. This way, he is relieved from the pain of seeing us as *thieves*, and he has given us 'food' for several days... Are you ready for the smell of roasted meat?"

Tears streamed down Jacobus's face, the words choking him. As

Jonathas realized his brother did not share the "joy" of the moment, he gripped Jacobus's arm violently, leveling the knife at him. "It seems I'll have no *use* for you, and so..."
"No!! No!!" Jacobus stammered, shaking violently. "I'll do anything... just... don't kill me..."

"Your life is *mine*," Jonathas replied, intoxicated by victory. "But I will sell it back to you in exchange for being my **loyal slave** for the rest of your life."
He let out a loud, booming laugh..."

"My lord... can't you hear me? You are screaming... is there anything we can do to ease your pain?"
Jonathas opened his clouded grey-lashed eyes with difficulty. He realized the man speaking to him was that same child, Jacobus, now a man of forty-seven. His life flashed before him—from that moment of enslavement to this current moment where Jacobus stood over him, watching him scream in agony.

The doctor arrived. "I fear the tumor has worsened, perhaps due to a fall or extreme pressure."
"We found him twisted on the bed," Jacobus said calmly. "He seems to have been asleep for hours."
"He has drunk too much; his bladder is distended," the doctor sighed. "I fear there is nothing more we can do."
Jonathas' eyes pleaded. "Can you do nothing? I cannot live another **hour** with this pressure... I feel **knives** shredding my nerves."

"There is one solution I have heard of, but it often fails," the

doctor said. "A catheterization. It will move you from the pain of blockage to a different, agonizing pain... and then, you wait for the end."
"Or," Jacobus added coolly, "you could end your life now, since the difference is *only* a matter of hours."
"No!!" Jonathas cried. "I don't want to die!"
"But you *will* die," Jacobus replied. "Waiting will only increase your torment."
Jonathas turned to the doctor, tears streaming down his face. "Do the surgery... there is something **important** I must live even *one* more day to do."
"I warn you," the doctor said. "The pain of the metal probe will be shocking and horrific."
"Let it be," Jonathas whispered, swallowing the same bitterness he had spent a lifetime forcing upon others.

Though Jonathas was a king that day, with vaults of gold and dozens of slaves, it was the most horrific day of his life. His screams nearly stopped his heart. The fire of the pain burned him without mercy. He and his men learned that day that the simple act of urination is a blessing more valuable than gold!

By nightfall, he had finally found relief from the blockage, though he was drifting in and out of consciousness from the trauma. He spent days in bed, delirious, caught between the pain of his body and the fear of losing his throne.

One night, during a celebration he forced himself to attend, he sat in his chair. He looked sallow and withered. He didn't dare to eat or drink, fearing the return of the blockage. He watched his men drink and dance, while he, their master, was deprived of

every pleasure because of... a few drops of fluid.

He stared at Johannes's empty chair. *"Does it not seem that someone from above has passed a judgment upon you that contradicts your very will?"*
"He babbled too much," Jonathas whispered to himself. "I let him go to spite my father's memory... but oh, if only he were here to succeed me now." He wondered, *Did he truly love me, even though I went out of my way to hurt him so he wouldn't push his foolish emotions on me?*

Looking at his men through the eyes of sobriety—a state he had been forced into for days—they looked like animals. "They live in the *illusion* that they are happy," he mused. "Is this the happiness I **sold** everything for?"
He looked toward the night sky. "Your 'illusion' is *nobler* than this **bestial** one before me. I will say what I vowed I would never say: I have decided to return to You... with all my strength!"
A tremor took his jaw. "Yes, I will do it. I am strong. I can! Absolute Love... I never knew what it was... but I will try to discover it."
He managed a faint smile. "That boy was right; leaving the state of lies is... a relief."

Jonathas forced himself up, rising slowly. As his guards moved to assist him, he gestured for them to stay back. He steadied his pace and walked out until he reached his inner bedchamber. He threw open the window, staring up at the star-studded sky, remembering moments of a long-lost, obsession .

He smiled as the scent of old days brushed against him. His features softened in a way that seemed alien to a face blackened by years of sin. Then, words he never imagined he would utter poured from him:
"I know You are above all things... You are not a prisoner of a sky, nor do the weaknesses of men dwell in You.

I know Christ is not Your son, and I know You are the Self-Sufficient who needs none of my **filthy** prayers."

He let his legs give way, sinking to his knees and clutching the windowsill.
"Yes, I know You lose nothing if You cast me into Hell, and Your kingdom gains nothing if I become a saint.

But now—for the first time—I know You are too merciful to let me burn myself with my own *stupidity* without sending that fool, Johannes, to be the mirror I hated."

He bowed his head, his expression one of awe. "My powerful Master, I see You have taught me the lesson my father failed to give. I admit it now; this world, even at its peak, is *void* of absolute happiness."
A cynical laugh traced his lips. "With a mere wretched, swollen piece of flesh, You shattered everything I spent my life for.

Moreover, everything I am currently living is because of the two orbs of water in my face; if you were to let them flow, I would be in the depths of despair."

Jonathas moved into a posture of submission. "My Master and my Lord... if You could return me now to that moment with my father, I swear I would ***not*** take this path again. I was ignorant of

Your power and too foolish to perceive Your wisdom."
His face contorted in a shameful confession. "You were right; power makes me tyrannical. It would have been *better* had I remained a peasant, so as **not** to bring upon myself a *thousand* years of **torment**."

His voice hitched. "Forty years of pleasure in exchange for a thousand of agony... perhaps more.
I could not endure months of illness—how can I endure this **terrible** judgment?
My Lord, **You** are the one who *prevents* me through Your Word from returning to fix my stupidity!"

His tone grew quiet. "Since I have tasted power and kingship, I know You **can**, if **You** wish, take me **out** of all this. You **can**, from Your vast treasuries, give me the means to pay the price of all my injustice **without using my own nerves.**"
His features yielded entirely.
"My Creator, You alone know my **helplessness** in the matter of love; so judge me by what is in my hands. Take my wealth, my authority, and here—take my pride as an offering. Just *remove* the **torture** from the equation of my reckoning."

He pushed himself up from the window and stepped back, his eyes still fixed on the sky. The room filled with the clatter of gold bracelets and rings as he tore them from his hands. He took his knife and broke off his long, sharp nails. Finally, he cast aside his silk robe, standing bare-chested toward the open window.
He whispered to himself, "Now, let me remember what Johannes did."

He recited a Psalm glorifying the Lord, then attempted to kneel as Johannes had shown him. It was no easy task; the pain intensified to an extreme degree. Yet, he ignored it, pressing his body down without mercy. He finally managed to kneel, his nerves trembling with agony, as he struggled to focus his intent solely on his Lord.
He could not hold the position for long. He rose, gasping, preparing for the hardest part: the prostration. This would put total pressure on his abdomen. Yet, even the most piercing pain could not bridle Jonathas once he set his mind to something. He dropped to his knees and began trying to bring his nose to the floor, whispering through clenched teeth:
"You will prostrate, you pig! You will prostrate—and not just once!"

The pain erupted, striking his nerves all the way to his head, but he continued to struggle against that "iron tumor." Finally, he let out a shriek of defeat and his back snapped upright. He panted, staring at the ground with shimmering eyes. As soon as he caught his breath, he forced his weary body to bend once more. Seconds later, tears of sharp pain leaked from his eyes, and he was forced to recoil before achieving his goal.
Moments later, his voice rose: "No!! I will do it! Nothing will stop me!"
He conquered his body mercilessly, time and time again. Even when he rested for a moment, his resolve reignited him.
It was perhaps the twenty-third attempt when he finally pressed his nose into the earth. The nausea of the tumor threatened to choke him, but he kept his face pressed to the ground, like a man signing a final, irrevocable contract. All he thought of was breaking through the spasm of pain to say: "You are the Strong

One... You are my Master."

He rose with bloodshot eyes, gasping from the electricity of the pain until a whisper escaped him: "Curse the Devil!"
He then remembered his old words to his teacher: *"No devil forced me into this... I am Jonathas Vilmos—the new Devil!"* He jerked violently, cursing himself. He wiped his face and closed his eyes, listening to the voice of his mind as it began to work in reverse.

He sat leaning against the wall. His clenched fist slowly relaxed to reveal eyes wide with dread. He would swallow his fear one moment and recalculate his path the next. Hundreds of crushed faces appeared to him; thousands of moments he once enjoyed now became hellish arrows of warning.
To believe meant to admit that all those oppressed people had a Lord who would *avenge* them. It meant preparing for every **insult** and **mockery** to return to him. It meant readying himself for them to pay him back in **full**, giving him a taste of the **misery** he had fed them.

A long time passed as he felt out this new reality. He finally stood and wiped his face, muttering firmly, "It is this way whether I think on it or not. I will occupy myself with the moment, and after that, I surrender to the Lord's judgment of me. Whatever it is... I deserve it."
He sat in the chair facing the window, recalling the Psalms one by one, rearranging them in his heart. He used the glorification of the Lord as a logical argument to convince his "Ego" to concede to this emergency plan, hoping to win the wager of life before it

was too late.

When the sun rose, he watched it with resolute eyes. He stood, washed his face, and put on his robe and jewelry once again. He glared into the mirror at his hollow, dry face. He adjusted his collar with a sharp hand, his knuckles turning white, rebuking his reflection: "Jonathas Vilmos!! If my deal fails because of you, I will *never* forgive you!"

He walked out as usual. His guards rose in respect. Their leader remarked, "It gladdens us to see you well, my lord. We were worried about you last night."
Jonathas nodded in his customary way and proceeded to the main hall where he ruled his mountain kingdom. He sat on his prominent throne and ordered one of his men to appear alone. When the man stood before him, Jonathas gave him a cunning look: "Welcome, Richard! So, how far have you come with the plan of betrayal?"

The man was shocked and began defending himself, citing his loyalty to the gang. Jonathas cut him off firmly: "Keep all of that; it doesn't concern me. I will charge you with a mission. If I like your performance, I will believe you and call the informant a liar. If not..."
Richard swallowed hard, wiping sweat from his brow. "That is fair."
When the guards heard the mission, they stared at one another in disbelief. They couldn't understand the purpose of Richard going out and distributing a bag of gold in one of the villages. But their master spoke with his usual confidence and mockery, so

they swallowed their confusion for fear of falling into a trap or being accused of treason themselves.

Richard left, chalking the strange mission up to a test of loyalty designed to be illogical. Shortly after, Jacobus entered, greeted him, and sat down. The next man arrived according to Jonathas' orders. In a similar fashion, he was tasked with taking two slaves to the village and setting them free—warning him of dire consequences if anyone found out.

Thus, the strange missions continued to fall upon the ears of the bewildered guards. As for Jacobus, his expression shifted as he stared at his older brother's face and the dark circles under his eyes. Jonathas seemed to be acting completely normal—laughing and mocking as if he had turned his entire gang into the subject of his daily ridicule.

However, after long observation, Jacobus noticed a single difference: Jonathas' nails were all short and jagged. Jacobus leaned back, lost in thought, glancing at his brother and reading every sign, waiting impatiently for the individual secret missions to end so he could confirm his hypothesis.

After a long day of strange commands, Jonathas rose to eat a few morsels of dinner. As he sat, Jacobus approached and stood beside him. "I smell the cat."
Jonathas shot a look at him from the corner of his eye. "The cat?" he repeated, putting a piece of food in his mouth.
Jacobus remained silent. Jonathas signaled his guards to leave them. When they were gone, he looked inquiringly at Jacobus, who replied, "I mean the moment you *turned* into your opposite."

Jonathas turned his face away in shame and whispered, "Just watch."

Jacobus took a seat, his face brightening. "I wonder, if our father had known that the evil in your heart would take more than **forty years** to empty out, what would he have done then?"
Jonathas cleaned his plate, a rare sight. He wished he could sate his hunger with the piles of food available, but the horrific pain of his condition was enough to keep him disciplined. Ignoring that, Jacobus added:
"I want to draw your attention to the fact that our father has taken a most terrible revenge upon you!"

Jonathas shot a sharp glance at Jacobus, who began to explain: "Yes. **Because** you killed him, you **lost** your trust in family bonds. You have lived **alone** your entire life.
You took your brother as a slave, your daughter as a cheap servant, and your son as a weak prisoner. You never married. You deprived yourself of all **love** and warmth."

Jonathas took a deep breath. Jacobus swallowed, realizing he had gambled by speaking his mind so boldly. Finally, Jonathas replied quietly:
"My eternal question, even before our father died: *What* is Love, in its essence, Jacobus?"

Jacobus was so taken aback by the question that he began to stutter. "To be... to be deeply attached to something."
"Yes," Jonathas added, "along with seeking the best interests of the beloved."

Relieved to find that his brother's tone wasn't mocking, Jacobus nodded. "Yes, that is it."
"Do you believe, then, that I love anything?"

Jacobus scratched his nose, hesitating. "You love planning, gold, power, drinking, and..."
"Those are my own **interests**, you fool!" Jonathas snapped. "I meant something *separate* from myself."
Jacobus thought long and hard, but Jonathas cut him off with a sneer. "Well done. I love **nothing**. I don't *even* know what this 'love' is that you all sanctify and labor under. I don't think it's an idea.
Everything around me follows my thoughts; if my thoughts flip, I turn on everything without that idiocy you call emotion!"

Jacobus couldn't grasp the concept. "What do you mean?! Is it possible you love **no** one at all? I thought you loved Johannes!"
"Johannes... I considered him 'Me' plus emotion. Thus, I honored myself through him. Raising him was my **way** of knowing what I would have been had I been born to a **wealthy** father."
Jonathas ran a hand through his hair. "The irony is that he turned toward religion like his *father*, despite the environment I gave him."

Jacobus shuddered. "You said it yourself—do you not love the Lord? At least when you wanted to be a saint?"
Jonathas looked aside. "I cannot say I **love** Him. Since He exists, I **must** draw close to Him for my *own* sake."
"Your sake... your interest..." Jacobus muttered with stern annoyance. "You reduce all the love in the world to **self-love**!"

Jonathas fell silent, his eyes calculating. Then he said, "It seems you are right. I do indeed 'love' myself. I am attached to myself and put myself above all else!"
Jacobus's eyes widened in shock and disdain. "It 'seems' I'm right?! There isn't a **shadow** of a doubt that you **adore** yourself, **worship** yourself, and want us **all** to worship you along with you!"
Jonathas leaned in, tilting his head toward him. "Are you serious? Do you **truly** believe that *I* love??"
"Without a doubt. Ask anyone; everyone believes it."

An unprecedented look of wonder crossed Jonathas' face.
"I... love!! Finally, I *know* what love is! And it truly controls me **just** as it does the rest of you!"
He rubbed his chin, thinking out loud. "If I sacrifice my body for my 'Self,' then my 'Self' is what I love—something I *feel* but cannot see."

He stood up and began pacing the room with excitement while Jacobus watched, bewildered. After a minute, Jonathas shouted, "I get it! I get it!!"
He struck his fist into his open palm, finalizing his plan. "This is what I must do: love the Lord. To be attached to Him and put Him above all else. That is what I shall do!"
Jonathas burst into laughter from pure joy, repeating, "I love! *I* love!"

But sensing the sharp, troubled look in Jacobus's eyes, he went silent, trying to regain his composure. He strode toward his room with a step that no longer belonged to the man he was. Jacobus

whispered to himself, "Madman or not... I don't understand how!"
He looked upward, lost in thought, and whispered, "Anyway, O Lord, where is Your alleged justice if 'Jonathas the Devil' is to enter Paradise?"

By evening, Jacobus entered his brother's room. He grew wary when he found Jonathas playing with his fingers, casting a mocking look his way. "What if I test your *loyalty* as well?"
Jacobus held his breath. "Command me!"
Jonathas smiled cunningly, staring at his broken nails. "Take some gold, buy some land, and *retire* from a life of crime."

Jacobus recoiled in shock. Jonathas added mockingly, "Do you **not** love your father? Weren't you the one **insistent** on staying with him? And 'Sunday'... when, if it weren't for the embers I sat you on, you never would have left it?"
Jacobus looked away. "I was burned, and Sundays burned with me... *Now* you are going to force me into faith, Jonathas?!"

Jonathas made a clicking sound of negation. "Don't misunderstand me. I am simply making a winning deal. Thus, I am clearing my responsibility as a former devil."
"Fine then, Devil. When you look out from the window of your 'high' Paradise, do not mock the one **You** seduced."
Jonathas shrugged, smiling. "No one mocks in Paradise, Jacobus."
Jacobus laughed weakly. "Then we are **certain** you **aren't** among its people." He lingered for a moment before whispering, "I didn't expect *this* to be the form your senility would take."

Jonathas' expression turned devious. "My 'senility' made me

forget: what was the last 'price' for an insult?"
Jacobus steeled himself. "The price that **proves** to your Lord that you are *betraying* Him."
A cynical laugh broke from Jonathas' lips. "The new price is that you must endure a 'sermon'... from *me*!!"

Jacobus sighed dryly. "Your justice is *like* your Lord's justice. You two will find **plenty** to talk about."
Jonathas threw a sharp look at him. "Am *I* just, you senile fool?"
Jacobus averted his eyes. "And why *else* would I compare you to your Lord if you were just?"
Jonathas went still. "And when did the Lord ever **wrong** you, you idiot?"
Jacobus fell silent. Jonathas repeated the question, his features hardening. When no answer came, his eyes turned devilish. "You insulted **My** Lord, and so you shall pay the price. After you pay, I will 'send' you to Him so you can experience His justice for yourself."

Jacobus knelt, stuttering, "If He is just, then **be** like Him! You *never* said this angered you before!"
Jonathas stared at his broken nail. "You remained silent and missed your chance."
"I was afraid to tell you," Jacobus whispered, "that I don't find Him just in giving you a chance at Paradise."

Jonathas toyed with his fingers, savoring Jacobus's trembling for a long time before speaking. "Aha, so you hope I won't be okay." Jacobus prostrated in a desperate attempt to save himself.

Jonathas continued, "You won't escape. You have **looted** and **killed** many; you will suffer for *all* of them so that ***justice*** may be served."
Jacobus stood up, his eyes sparking with resentment. He hated that Jonathas would punish him for things he had forced him to do in the beginning. Jonathas leaned toward him with a sly face, mimicking the words of the Lord:
"But if you please Me, I will compensate your injustice toward people from the endless treasuries of My kingdom, until they all forgive you and I admit you into Paradise!"

Jacobus realized the trick, his eyes dulling in mockery. "Are you the *gentlest* preacher in the world?"
Jonathas' teeth flashed with pride. "Those words only suit the **Mighty** One **to whom** I have **sold** myself." He leaned back. "There—I have acted out Judgment Day for you. Did you find justice? Or do you want us **both** to go to Hell just so you can **call** it fair?"
Jacobus rose and turned away to leave. Jonathas closed his eyes with a sigh, only to hear footsteps and feel a cold blade against his throat and a hot palm sealing his mouth. Jacobus's voice hissed in his ear with hatred: "I don't care about your Lord's justice. I will take my right and my father's right Myself."

Jonathas didn't flinch or resist. Instead, he folded his hands over his stomach and stretched out his legs as if preparing for a coffin. Wary, Jacobus leaned over to look into his eyes; he found them staring back with a calm, mocking stillness. Astonished, Jacobus faltered. "Why aren't you afraid?!"

Jonathas' eyes laughed even more. He closed them, waiting.

Jacobus gripped the knife, frowning, and raised it to deliver a blow fueled by the weight of his hate. The blade plunged down, shaking the wood of the chair right next to Jonathas' neck. Jacobus pulled back. "You're right. What a pathetic revenge this is—helping you *bypass* your torment just as it's finally beginning!"

Jonathas shook with laughter as he pulled the knife from the wood. "I will die a hideous death; make sure you attend it!"

Jacobus walked around to face him. "One would think you were talking about an enjoyable party."

Jonathas shrugged. "That is because 'Jonathas' is no longer the *center* of the universe. I've begun to relish seeing him shattered like the others!" He tried to hide his laugh behind his fingers. "Go on, I have commanded you. You will comply, and you will take Julia with you."

Jacobus smiled with an expression of pure agony. "What a wonderful feeling it is to be *safe* from your evil! If only the Priest had bound you in chains back then."

Jonathas moved as if shackled. "It is the 'Chains of the Lord' that you truly seek!"

Within the hour, Julia was with her father, pleading, her eyes clouded with anxiety. "Please, Father, reconsider this decision to exile us!"

He didn't look at her. "I **haven't** exiled you; I am simply forced to be 'good' to my relatives."

Julia went silent, her eyes wide with shock. "Do you have news that the soldiers are **going** to do something?"

He looked at her with a sly glint. "Yes... soon."

"But I don't see any sign of that!"

He cut her down with a look. She stammered, "Fine, you certainly know best... but you can't tell me my life has just **shattered** like this out of *nowhere*!"

"Truly, my little one?" he mocked. "Fine, take your mother with you so you can find a lap to hide in!"
She tried to speak, but he beat her to it. "Tell me, which is better: an animal or a human?"
Julia hesitated. "A human...?"
Jonathas clapped softly. "Aha, well done. A human! So if animals eat and mate according to their abilities, is a human supposed to be just like them? Or better?"

Julia frowned, leaning her head to the side. "I like my life as it **is**. I do **not** want to change."
"You are an animal," he replied cheerfully. "I mean, you are free. But let it be known that *behind* this life of yours lies the Hell of the Lord."
She grimaced, her voice sharp. "You are the one saying *this*, Father?!"
He raised his nose, speaking with a sternness designed to sting. "Honestly, I would have preferred to leave you to live like a beast; after all, that is **exactly** why I spared your life."

That tone shook Julia. She withdrew from the conversation. "Fine... since we must part... let us say our goodbyes now instead of this!"
He relaxed his features. "I accept your goodbye—but from a *distance*. I am your 'father', as you know."
Frozen by the string of shocks, Julia no longer knew what had

come over her father or what senility had seized him at the end of his life. But he answered her with a strong face: "Yes, death made me **recalculate**. I believed in the Lord, and I regretted the waste of my youth." He added, watching her frozen expression: "Take a lesson from seeing the one **who** taught you rebellion standing before you, unable even to **urinate**."
She sighed, clutching her collar, her voice choked. "Goodbye, Father." She walked out of the room, dragging the weight of a profound shock behind her. Jonathas followed her with his eyes until she vanished, smiling with joy. "I am glad you **aren't** smarter than your father!"

Afterward, Jessica came as well to hear the same words and be struck by the same wonder. Ultimately, the three of them found no choice but to depart that night according to the plan Jonathas had drawn for them. Naturally, they took with them as much gold and as many valuables as they could carry.

Jonathas entered his room for the final time. He stood to repeat the prayer that had set his body ablaze with agony the night before, but a strange irony took hold: this time, as he bowed, the torment was strangely less. He remained in a long, deep prostration, feeling—for the first time—that he had finally found himself.

The true shock came with the dawn. He discovered the secret behind the pain's retreat: the tumor, against all odds, was receding. Even the physician could not mask his bewilderment. "You are undoubtedly lucky," the doctor remarked. "I have performed this procedure many times, but I never expected a

result this rare."
Jonathas stared at him, eyes wide, words trembling with disbelief. "You mean... I **won't** die?"
The doctor shrugged. "If you can eat and drink, why should you die?"

He left, leaving Jonathas in a state of paralysis. After months of drowning in the prospect of death, a peculiar dread seized him—not a fear of living, but a fear that his "deal" had been corrupted. He had begun to pay a steep price for Paradise through yesterday's painful penance and the sending of his family away. Now, was God returning his life as if to say, *I do not want you*?

His guards rushed in to congratulate him, but Jonathas was elsewhere. *I built my entire plan on the premise of my death!* he thought. *And now... do I squander my life if God's intent was to cast me out? I can drink, I can...*

A voice whispered to his heart: *Of course you won't **squander** it. No one throws away the life of a **king**—the feasts, the women, the wine! Look at them; they look upon you with veneration. They follow your every command. It is madness to let go of the reins you hold so firmly.*

Suddenly, Jonathas struck his own face with both hands, shouting, **"NOOO!"**
The guards recoiled, shocked by his ragged, furious breathing—the polar opposite of the joy they expected. They could not hear the roar within him: ***How** dare you? How **dare** you reconsider, Jonathas? What were these last two nights **for**?*
*Have you become one of the **fools** played by emotion? Let them*

*all go to hell, so long as **you** are whole!*

Driven by a sudden resolve, he surged past his bewildered guards and stormed into the main hall. Drawing his sword, he rallied his men. "Word has reached me! The King's soldiers intend to **wipe** us out 'on their way' back from the southern wars. Let us show them **who** they face, men!"
The outlaws erupted, swords drawn, chanting for victory. They listened to their seasoned commander's plan with rapt attention, certain from a hundred past victories that he would lead them to more plunder.

According to the plan, they took their positions on the mountain's edge, stashing their slaves and treasures on the opposite flank. They waited on a knife's edge for the moment of the "Black Attack," intent on proving this fortress impregnable by tricking the King's legion into believing they numbered in the hundreds.
Only one man, patrolling on horseback, knew the truth. He endured the sharp stabs of pain worsened by the horse's gait, stifling a derisive laugh he wished he could scream into the heavens.

He moved from unit to unit, providing "precautions," until he reached the far side of the mountain. There, he confirmed that everything—the gold, the captives—had been gathered exactly as he ordered. With a short, final glance at his kingdom, his prestige, and his wealth, a sense of ecstasy washed over him. It was the thrill of the puppeteer; knowing that with his intellect, he had shaped their hollow emotions and led them like slaves to his own whims.

He smiled at them one last time with a cold heart, cloaking the second half of his plan: **bringing the King's men.**

While his men thought he was inspecting the lines, Jonathas slipped away, racing like the wind toward Catherina's village at the mountain's foot. A tyrannical smile dominated his features as he looked at the vast blue sky and cried out, "Here! Take all My wealth!"
He burst into the village under the suspicious glares of the people. He rode straight toward a contingent of soldiers who, gripped by instinct, leveled their weapons at him. Jonathas threw his sword to the ground and shouted,
"Well done! I am Jonathas Vilmos, leader of the mountain gang... and I come to surrender. I **won't** risk my life for a ruse, as you well know!"

The soldiers surrounded him warily. When they saw he was truly alone, their captain stepped forward. "Let me guess. You want a deal?"
"Yes," Jonathas replied. "I will tell you how to **uproot** the gang with fifty men **before** tomorrow evening. You will free the villagers and recover the gold. In exchange, my execution shall be the same as the others—and you will let me speak before I die."
The captain was stunned; the other soldiers erupted in laughter at such a "pathetic" bargain. But Jonathas' laughter joined theirs, forcing them into a confused silence.
"Nothing else?" the captain asked. "You **won't** be allowed to change your mind."
Power surged in Jonathas' expression. "Laugh at yourselves. I have **done** what I desired. All my life, I have been **above** the law."
"Fine," the captain spat. "Agreed. Dismount."

Jonathas got down and struck his horse, sending it galloping away to cut off any path of retreat. Then, in the tone of a commander, he detailed the counter-plan: the secret passes, the numbers, the armories.
Realizing the gravity of the information, the captain hurried Jonathas to the high commander, who dispatched word to every surrounding garrison at lightning speed.

The outlaws found exactly what their leader promised: the King's soldiers marching toward them. They took their positions, fighting fiercely according to the plan of the leader they had "lost" an hour ago. But while they fought at the front, the mountain behind them was being swiftly invaded. The battle turned for the King's men with eerie speed—as if they 'knew' every secret in advance.

The next day, the villagers lined the streets, cheering the soldiers who had ended decades of misery in a single afternoon. They welcomed back their enslaved kin—broken souls who were barely recognizable, saved only by a ray of mercy that had shone after a long days of prayers.
Rumors swirled. Why had the King not saved them sooner, if it was this easy?

Meanwhile, Jonathas stood surrounded by guards, watching the victory procession. He laughed in fits, ignored by the soldiers who viewed him with a mix of contempt and fear.
He remained as he always was: mocking their joy, remembering how he had built this entire stage the day before, testing the loyalty of men who had forgotten to test the loyalty of their

leader!

He beamed with pride as he saw his men led in chains behind the horses. He looked at them not as his own, but as strangers. He glanced at the sky and whispered, "Here is My prestige and My power, Lord!"
Even the smallest children threw stones and insults at the bandits. Their heads were bowed, their faces darkened with a shame Jonathas had never seen. He shrugged. "Treachery was their trade; this is merely the wages."

Yet, a lump formed in his throat. Soon, it would be his turn. He took a long, steady breath, telling his soul that it was too late to turn back. He had surrendered himself long ago—not when he went into the village, but forty years ago when he first misjudged his path. Now, his body had to be the final sacrifice to God.

He was led to the Governor’s palace—a grand stone edifice smelling of ancient authority. He was marched through narrow corridors until a massive, brass-studded door groaned open, revealing the Great Reception Hall.
The hall was cavernous, with iron chandeliers hanging from a soaring ceiling and walls draped in ancestral banners. At the far end, behind a heavy ebony desk, sat a man radiating opulence in a fur-lined purple velvet coat.

Jonathas felt the insignificance of his former "palace" compared to this, yet his ego stood tall. His eyes met those of the Prince. Jonathas' pride bristled as he realized he was being summoned not as a prisoner, but as a curiosity.

"So, you are the wolf of the mountain," the Prince said. "Explain your strategy to me."
Jonathas hesitated, loathing the act of obeying after a lifetime of being obeyed. Yet, he began to speak, flaunting his brilliance and cunning.

When he finished, the Prince leaned back. "You are gifted in military matters. It is proof enough that you survived thirty years and surrendered only by your **own** will. I have a proposal: we release you, and you serve as a consultant under our banner. We will reward you handsomely."

"You mean in the southern wars?" Jonathas asked coldly.
The Governor interrupted sharply, "Where else?"
Jonathas laughed softly, straightening his posture. "I surrendered My 'kingdom' because I struck a **deal** with *their (Ottomans')* God."
"You dare speak so **insolently** in the presence of the Prince?" the Governor roared.
Jonathas' smile widened. The Prince's voice turned sharp with suppressed rage. "Keep smiling, and perhaps I shall have your teeth broken along with your bones on the breaking wheel. Take him from my sight!"
Jonathas walked out with his head held high, his gait confident. He did not walk like a man who had lost his life; he walked like one soaring toward the fulfillment of an ancient dream.

The following day, after the other outlaws had been raised upon their crosses, the soldiers brought Jonathas to his place in the center of the line. The herald cried out to the masses: *"The final word belongs to the tyrant Jonathas, scion of the Vilmos line,*

head of the Accursed Gang!"

Jonathas ascended the platform amidst the roar of the hateful crowd. He maintained his composure and his smile, facing both the vengeful eyes of the peasants and the shocked glares of his dying men. Dressed in black silk, his white hair catching the light, he spoke in a voice that shook the air:
"Villagers! You wonder how the mountain fell in a single day? The reason stands before you—it towers over you all!"
He raised his hands to the sky. "Jonathas Vilmos **believed in the Almighty**! Therefore, I *had* to apologize to the Lord and offer Him ***everything*** I owned, that He might **return** that love... there, in Heaven!"

The eyes of the hanging bandits bulged. They erupted in a chorus of curses, their voices like hyenas snapping at a prize they couldn't reach. They longed to tear apart the traitor who had brought them to this end, yet there he stood, boasting without a shred of shame.
Jonathas met their noise with a wide grin. He turned back to the villagers, his voice rising above the din.

"What you do not know is that I—Vilmos, **who** tormented you—began my life as a **devoted** monk!
They made me search for God in a book of **contradictions**. With **strange** rituals, they *distracted* me from seeing Him in His **perfect universe**. When I called to Him, I **thought** He did not hear; I did not realize **I was** the one who had ***closed*** my eyes to His care."

He placed a hand on his cross. "It is ***No*** cause to worship Christ

that he is **only** the light from the fire of God; for we are **ALL** light from that fire! We are **ALL** His children!
The Great God of the Kingdom does **not** need flesh; **God is One and Glorious!"**

The religious fervor of the crowd turned into a riot. Soldiers rushed to silence him. As a final word, he cried: "Does it satisfy you to say that **Vilmos the Devil** died the *same* death as **your Lord**?"

The soldiers gagged him and hoisted him onto the wood. His mind raced: *So, this is how some of saints were killed.* He sighed inwardly. *Ah, if only this moment had come **while** I was a saint; my bargain would have been far **more** profitable...*
As the soldiers retreated, a hail of stones and filth rained down. Fires were lit below. The scent of searing flesh rose to their nostrils. Before them were cursing faces; the insults were as stinging as the flames.

Jonathas' heart hammered against the agony. Yet, a cold part of his mind watched the scene with satisfaction, like a director overseeing his final shot. *Look at me now!* he screamed internally toward the sky. *My body is my last offering to You. Therefore, **I Love You**!*

But the pain was the winner, absolute and shattering. Eventually, he broke. He joined the others in their screaming. His tears washed through his beard, falling toward the flames at his feet trying to put them out without hope.

That was the last thing Jonathas knew before his father suddenly appeared in his vision—the same old scene at the table before the murder. His father reached out a trembling hand, offering him that half-piece of dry bread.

This time, Jonathas' weary soul did not hesitate. He reached out his hand—not to take the bread, but to kiss the hand of the father who had finally conquered him.

At that exact moment, a heavy stone struck his head with terminal force, snapping it back against the wood. Then, the head slumped forward, still and forever.*

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* Do you believe that 'Benjamin Netanyahu' could ever reach a state of true faith in Yahweh (God), such that he could transcend his own 'Ego,' dismantle the Entity himself, release the captives, and confess his injustice?
Or will God forge a happy ending over his remains?

As for you, dear reader—if you wish for a second part of the novel, exploring what happened to Johannes and Catharina after their departure, let me know in the comments!